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by HARRY F. OLMSTED

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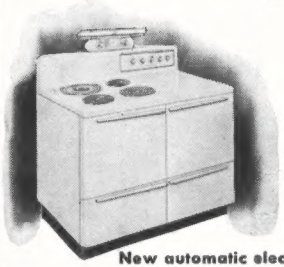

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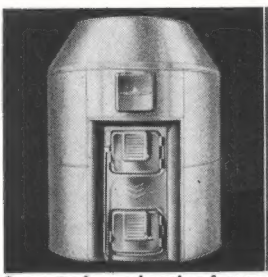

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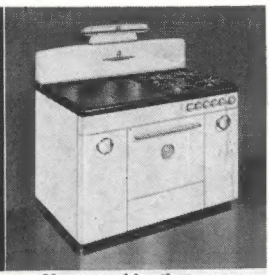

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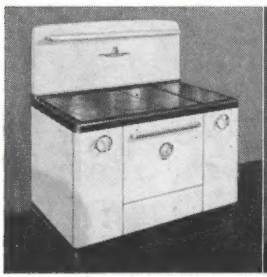

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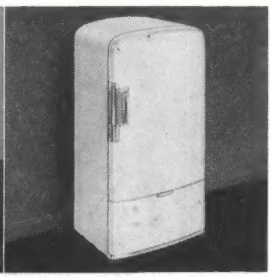

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★ THE STRAWBOSS ★

A MAN sometimes gets his belly full of reading newspapers. He gets fed up with the pious palaverings of political stooges who will save the world one way or another. The pros and cons of geopolitical situations cooked up by selfish or downright ornery world ward-heelers leaves an hombre almost addled.

The oratorical garbage dished out by the chairman of "The League Against Three-Legged Rats" is as confusing and hypocritical as the roaring denunciations of his opponent, the chairman for "The Committee for the Propagation of Unupholstered Skunks."

". . . it is only through the inherent honesty and integrity of man that rats with three legs will be banished to hell-and-gone!" is the pompous opinion of one valiant plush-bottomed champion of that cause.

"Humanity, freedom, Christianity, Joe Blow and six insane Hindustanis will all be served if this resolution favoring blah, blah, etc. is passed," rants the backer of unupholstered skunks.

Okay, pardner, maybe it all ain't that bad. But most of this pawin' and bellerin' in newspapers and over radios shore does get under a gent's skin once in a while.

The honest-to-God citizen usually just wants to be left alone to try to get his chores done. But all this running off at the mouth by a herd of would-be newssheet, magazine and radio Napoleons and Alexanders gets a man so gosh-darn het up that, in some instances, he starts looking around for somebody to take a poke at.

Unlike his old grandpappy, the average U. S. citizen can't seem to find, in the face of this torrent of political, social and psychological ejaculations, anything sufficiently solid and concrete to face, man to man, and find out what the hell the score is.

When the wagoneers of the Old West had to cross a river they had a hard-headed, common-sense physical problem to solve. They fixed that by securing logs, barrels and make-shift floats to their wagons' sides.

They defeated drought and starvation by erecting windmills. They defeated predatory, roving Indian and outlaw bands, more often by superior firearms and experience in their use. But on many occasions they called "coup" using the redskins' own primitive tomahawk and scalping knife.

The salty graybeards of the plains had something concrete to work on. They turned to with barbed wire to fence the ranges. And the cowmen, presented with this wire problem, went to work on it in their turn without a single moment of speculation. Then rifles cracked and six-guns roared. But there was no confusion of thought or vagueness as to the point of the matter.

Vigilantes rode, the established law was feeble, hangropes looped from cottonwood trees and up-thrust wagon-tongues. A few innocent men died, but more of the guilty ones did, too. The law grew strong, the gunfire lessened. The Old West was dying.

Today, the nation faces forces of propaganda and counter-propaganda and a thousand ideologies and creeds which the Frontier knew nothing about. The average hombre today, his mind jammed with explanations of a dozen quick, quack remedies for the good of humanity, is wandering about like a blind man. Or he has reached a state where he throws up his hands and mutters, "The hell with it!"

But there is one thing the true American of today can do in the face of confusion, fear, somnolence, greed, cowardice, ruthlessness and cynicism. He can try his damndest to make his forebears proud of him. He can try, with whatever comparably puny weapons he has on hand, to figure out the right trail to ride in this upside-down world. He must believe in America simply because he was born in America, or because he came here to get away from the stink-pots of the Old World.

We can't afford to let the spirits of our buckskinned founding dead reckon the Americans of 1946 a crew of lily-livered sons, who refuse even to try to find a way out of whatever dilemma Providence sees fit to put them in.

Sixguns and guts broke many a problem in the Old West. More of the same—especially guts, at the moment—are needed today.

—THE EDITOR

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GOLD-RUSH JUSTICE

By MILTON ANGLE

Justice was sometimes loco in the Mother Lode country, but mostly it was right honest—and fatal!

REPLACING the ornate, square spectacles, which he had just vigorously polished, the judge peered at the two men who stood before him. One, grizzled of face, was dirty and unkempt, clad in a tattered grey shirt and trousers which had been repeatedly repatched.

Standing before the judge, he shifted nervously on his feet, twisting his faded, sweat-stained hat in his hands. The second man was smooth-shaven, freshly so, and he was well dressed in cut-away coat, striped trousers and a flashing checkered vest across the front of which hung a huge gold watch chain from which a dozen gold nuggets of various sizes hung suspended.

"Jim Berger," the judge spoke, shifting his gaze to the grizzled man, "you have been accused of willfully and intentionally stealing one mule from Tom Manning, and using said mule at your claim on the Forks for a period of four days before apprehended. This court finds you guilty as charged and fines you the sum of fifty dollars.

"However this court knows that you do not have any such money with which to pay your fine, and, since justice must be had, and since no court should sit without being properly remunerated for its costs, it is hereby decreed that the plaintiff, Tom Manning, who is a prosperous man and has plenty of money, shall pay fine and costs."

Tom Manning, hearing the judge's decision, opened his mouth to protest, but quickly closed it again. This was the town of Sonora, in the Mother Lode country of California in the 1850's. And the judge who had just handed down the decision was George Sullivan, Alcade of the town as well as it's "Judge Lynch," whose decisions were known far and wide.

Tom Manning, therefore, did not protest the decision handed down by the judge. He clamped his jaws tight, reached in his pocket, pulled out a well-filled poke and handed over ninety dollars in gold to the Judge.

When Tom had gone, Sullivan looked up at the still shuffling Berger. Reaching out a long, bony finger, he separated the pile of coins Manning had just left. Selecting the smallest—a ten-dollar gold piece—he slid it across the desk toward Berger.

"You take this, Jim," he grinned at the prospector. "You take this and go get yourself a shave—and a bath!"

Once, in a single breath, he had condemned to die, by hanging, five men who were brought before him charged with killing and robbing a prospector of his poke. When it was later brought to his attention that one of the men was innocent, that he could not possibly have been present when the murder was committed, having been seen in Stockton, over sixty miles away, by numerous witnesses, on the day the crime was committed, he waved the information aside.

"This court," he stated, "judges the cases brought before it on the evidence presented and what it feels is right and proper justice. That man may have been in Stockton, but he shouldn't have been cohorting with murderers after he came back. He may even have been innocent. Mind, I'm not saying it, but to me he looked guilty as hell!"

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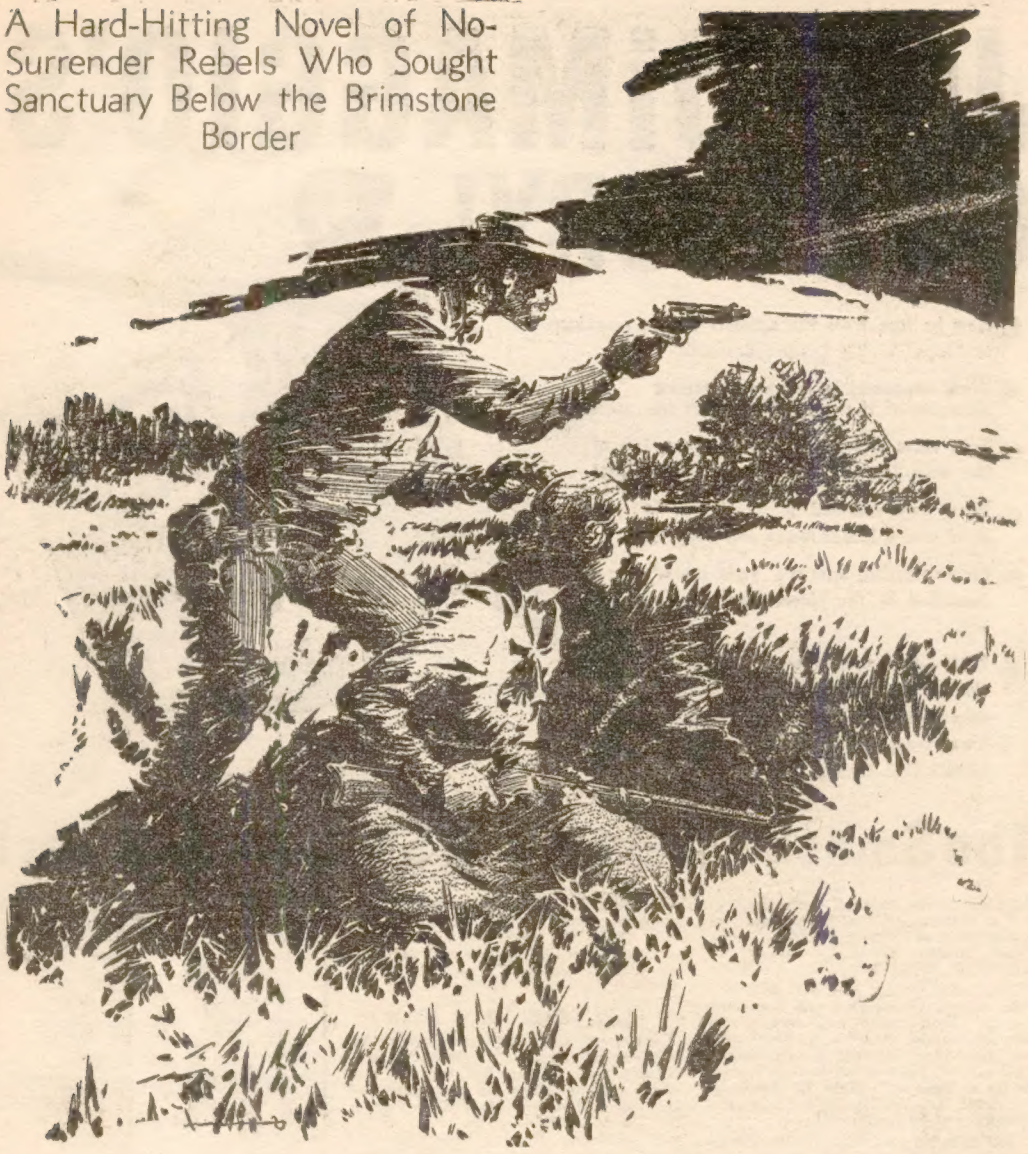


By HARRY F. OLMSTED

The tattered Stars and Bars had fallen in bitter, glorious defeat, and Jeff Davis sat alone but not forgotten, in gloomy Fortress Monroe. But the whang-leather cowman called Brett Selling rode grimly down the powdersmoke years, an unreconstructed rebel, ever hunting the Kansas Jayhawker who was baptized in the blood of Selling's kinsfolk, unaware that the sudden-death renegade whom he sought—was his own smooth-talking, quick-trigger saddle mate!

They were met by the deadly six-shooter of a one-time guerrilla and the carbine of a girl. . . .

GUN-SONS OF THE BRIMSTONE BORDER!

CHAPTER ONE

Seeds of Guerrilla War

TIMES were changing, fast. Hatreds fanned the Kansas-Missouri Border, turning state against state, family against family, brother against brother. Innocent blood dyed the bottomlands of the Missouri, the Marmiton, Osage and Blue. Homes and crops were food for the torch. Nights were made terrible by the hoofbeats of avenging Free Soilers, Redlegs, Sons of Liberty, Loyal Leaguers. It was fated that the ghosts stalking these days of terror should split asunder the long friendship of the Sacketts and the Bynums.

Barlow Sackett and Sunday Bynum were early settlers, neighbors, separated by a scant mile, and an invisible barrier of the Devil's fashioning. The Sackett farm was in Johnson County, Kansas, a mile west of Blue River and half that far west of the Border. The Bynum farm fronted Blue River, half a mile east of the Line, in Jackson County, Missouri. There were three

sons in each family, two Sackett daughters and one Bynum girl. Sunday Bynum kept a few Negro slaves; Barlow Sackett kept none. This difference was of small import until abolitionist agitators began their fiery oratory.

The Sackett young ones regularly walked that mile to attend classes, Millicent Bynum having been a teacher in Ohio before her marriage. More often than not, their Bynum playmates walked part way home with them, playing their childish games along the trail through the woods.

The seeds of feud were sown when Snowball, ten-year-old son of the Bynum slave couple, found a nest of quail eggs. Eight-year-old Jackson Bynum claimed them, because his father owned Snowball. Hepsibah Sackett, his own age, flared up.

"Nobody owns Snowball but God," she declared. "An abolitionist who came to our house said so. All the slaves will soon be free."

Jackson snorted. "I'd like to see some abolitionist touch Snowball. Anyhow, Snowball don't want to be free."

"No suh!" agreed the chubby Negro. "Ah lubs Marster, Miss Milly an' de chillun."

"Yeah?" Eleven-year-old Brad Sackett had spoken no word. Lusty, big for his age, he already owned a Shawnee pony and could do a man's work grubbing stumps or shucking corn. His face flushed now and there was hard stubbornness in his pale eyes. "It makes no difference if you do love 'em, Snowball. They gotta give you up, see? You're in Kansas now an' free as the wind. You're comin' with me an' Hepsibah."

"Mammy!" screamed the boy, and turned to run. Brad caught him in a few long strides.

Jackson cried, "Leave Snowball alone, you damned abolitionist!" He flung himself upon the larger Brad, his fists working madly. Hepsibah, trying to pull Jackson away, was hit in the stomach and fell down. Jackson, spewing curses he little understood, surged again to the attack. Brad, trying to hold the struggling, screaming Negro boy, somehow got his jackknife out and open and lunged with it. Jackson, struck in the throat, cried weakly, choked on a rush of blood, collapsed and lay still.

Shocked by his act, Brad released Snowball who broke into the timber, screaming for help. The Sackett young ones looked at one another, turned and raced for home.

That night, when the Sackett work horses squealed in their stalls and Brad emerged from the house to see what the trouble was, twelve-year-old Bitt Bynum shot him through the heart with a squirrel rifle. Cord Bynum, two years Bitt's senior, raced from the barn, his knife dripping blood. The horses were dying in the barn, their bellies ripped open.

Next day, with soft white snow sifting down as if to hide scars that never heal, both families, dry-eyed, buried their dead. The only tears were shed by Winnie Bynum. At fifteen, she was already "promised" to Omer Sackett, who was a year older.

No more would the Sackett children attend Milly Bynum's classes. Never again would Sunday Bynum lead his flock to the Sackett farm of a Sabbath to hear old Barlow, an ordained preacher, thunder his "hellfire and damnation." Death stood between friends now, pointing a grisly finger over a wall of blood.

A week passed, rampant with dreadful rumors which needed no substantiating. Then, one night frosty with three inches of crusted snow, Barlow Sackett led a company of Jim Hill's Redlegs to the Bynum farm. A perfunctory demand for slaves was hotly refused. Sunday Bynum and his sons, Cord and Bitt, fought from the windows. Milly and her daughter, Winnie, rammed powder and lead into hot-barreled guns. Barlow Sackett died as he rushed the Bynum door. Later, Milly died in the house, a bullet in her brain. Winnie, crazed with terror, opened a window and fled into the night.

REDLEG torches fired the roof, making the house an inferno. "Cord!" Old Sunday's voice crackled. "Go out that side. Bitt, you take the other. I'll bust out the front, holdin' 'em busy while you dust—"

"They'll kill you, dad!" broke in Bitt.

"Sure—at a price. I've lived my life; yours is all before you. Quantrell's after these Jayhawkers, up around Independence some'ers. Join him. Take your pay in blood."

Sixteen-year-old Cord, stepping out an east window, was riddled with bullets be-

fore he reached cover. Slugs snicked and hummed about Bitt as he quit the burning house on the west and sprinted across the brilliantly lighted clearing. The sting of them was in his flesh, but nothing could stop him short of death. His new Colt's revolver flamed as he ran. He killed two outlaw militiamen before he stumbled and fell behind a corn shock. Kneeling there, he watched Old Sunday make his fight, taking a terrible toll for the life he was throwing away.

A revolver in each hand, the hoary he-wolf of the Blue roared from the holocaust, smashing bullets at his enemies, cursing them, daring death to strike. Bitt, powerless to help, knelt there with tears running down his cheeks, teeth grinding, sobbing curses that were really prayers.

God must have answered Bitt that night. A bullet in the leg dumped Sunday and the exultant Redlegs swarmed out at him. From the ground, he killed four, drove the rest to cover. Rising, miraculously still alive, he retreated, shooting at anything he could see, wasting not a bullet.

So he joined Bitt who, despite his wounds, was able to help his crippled sire to a secret corral, where horses were hidden against the hunger of raiding bandits. They were saddling when the slaves—John and Allura and Snowball came from the thickets, having fled at the first alarm. Snowball cried; John moaned and Allura prayed when told of Milly's death. None had seen Winnie.

Allura tore up her underskirt to patch up Bitt and "de Marster." Bitt was hit six times, Sunday thirteen, a number he came to believe lucky, for he had that night slain thirteen men.

"What us Bynums gonna do, Marster?" sobbed John. "Whar kin we go dat dem debbil Jayhawkehs don't fin' us?"

"Listen, all of you." Sunday's voice quavered. "From now on, this border's the Devil's bloody playground, an' no place for slaves. Load whatever the Redlegs leave behind. Hitch up an' drive to my friend, Job Crabtree, on Honey Creek, west of Shawnee Mound. Serve him. If I come out I'll make a home for you. If not, you are free. Goodbye, my friends." He shook hands with them.

"Lawd bless yawl, Marster."

Sunday and Bitt spurred northward, the sky flaming red behind them. When almost beyond earshot, they heard the faint echoes of gunfire.

"Winnie!" cried Bitt. "They've killed Winnie."

"Wolves!" snared Sunday. "Vermin. Wuss'n Injuns. What I said goes, son. We take our pay in blood."

Long afterward they learned from Snowball what part of that firing was. Black John and Allura, creeping back to the barn for a wagon, were shot by three Redlegs left behind to finish the job. Allura died instantly. John, shot through the middle, rolled onto his back and killed all three as they ran up. The cap-and-ball pistol he used he had taken from the lax hand of Cord Bynum. The slaves had seen nothing of Winnie Bynum.

Sunday and Bitt joined Quantrell on the Little Blue. Their first raid took in the Sackett farm where, despite the pitiful pleadings of Amanda Sackett, they hung her oldest boy, Kirby. Omer, another son, ran like a deer, threaded a deadly pattern of bullets and escaped.

For nearly three years Sunday and Bitt rode under the black flag, in the forefront of guerrilla battles, with such stalwarts as George Todd and John Jarrette at their stirrups. Bill Coger, Cole Younger, Frank and Jesse James and others just as intrepid, hundreds of them.

These killers were fired by a fury of opinion that brooked no sentiment. They were desperate, remorseless warriors, living under the damning shadows of monstrous crimes perpetrated on their kinsmen, shooting a bloody path through civil war delirium. They struck at night, like demons. Fattening a growing toll of lives as they stood at bay. Living by unmatched six-shooter magic or dying like wolves. Their long gallop drawing ever tighter the cordon of infuriated man-hunters.

That first year they rode the vengeance trail laughingly. The second year the laughter was stilled; they were weary, their vengeance sated. Their only urge now was an unsparing devotion to the Confederacy. Independence, Lone Jack, Osage River, Lawrence, with its awful toll; Wellington, Grinter, Centralia, Little Blue, all these actions were behind them. Todd and Anderson, matchless leaders, were dead, and many another good man with them. Small

honor to a guerrilla who could not boast as many wounds as his age in years. Old bands were splitting up, scattering. Six thousand Federals were closing the trap. The sands were running out.

The winter of 1864-65 was a nightmare. Remounts were unobtainable save by theft from the Yankees. Food was scarce and poor. Enemies were everywhere. It was kill or be killed. Quantrell had been slain at Salt River, some of his most able lieutenants with him. The guerrilla band with whom Bitt and Sunday rode were driven back from the Missouri. Eastward, ever eastward. Out of the country they knew as a fox knows its lair. One by one, they were being whittled down. A council of war was held in the timbered fastnesses along the Tennessee River. They took a vote. The band split. George Shepherd, as keen and quick a soldier as the war produced, led his band toward Texas. Frank James led the rest eastward, among them Bitt and Sunday.

At a little place called Ela, they contacted a detached and badly decimated unit of the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, due that very day to be cited by the President of the Confederate States. It was the great man himself who insisted that the guerrillas, whose fame had burned like a fierce hot flame through the hard beset South, share in the honors. And so, with a fanfare of bugles, they were drawn up and commended.

Jefferson Davis, towering toward the sun, emaciated as any of his worn veterans, got through the words somehow, his deep, resonant voice breaking. For tears dimmed the lines he had to read and there was a lump in his throat. These remnants of once proud, laughing outfits were sorry scarecrows, ragged, sick with unhealed wounds, half starved, yet still proud, still fiercely full of fight and patriotism.

Bitt Bynum, his eyes glistening with admiration for the great leader, had a time making his knees behave. He was weak with recurrent fever. Eighteen now, he was emaciated, grey-haired, rheumatic. Sunday, still a fighting devil, had lost an eye and his body was covered with bullet scars. He was stiff, weary, nearing the end of his rope.

Davis passed among the men, shaking hands, offering thanks in his deeply courteous way, making a suggestion here, giving an order there. The Bynums and many others were mustered out that day, by executive order. "You have given everything," Jeff Davis said, and something tragic lay in the deep-set eyes in his sharply chiseled face. "You have blazed a trail your successors will be proud and humble to follow. Whatever Fate holds for our cause you are beyond helping. Go home. Build a new life. God bless you all."

Bitt was never to forget the man or his words, his sorrow that the cause was daily more hopeless, his feeling first for his men. Old Sunday wasn't so well pleased.

"Go home, he told us," the old warrior complained. "It's time somebody told him most of us ain't got no home."

"He meant us to make homes, dad."

"What use? Yankees will pour in like locuses, grabbin' land an' mills, electin' slaves to office, troddin' us into the dust. I've no guts fer that, son."

"Me either, dad. What's on your mind? Texas? California?"

"Yankees has took Californy. Texas will be next. I'm thinkin' further south."

"Mexico?"

"The same. Startin' again, with good grass an' the beginnins of hoss an' hawned cattle herds. I'll never live to see it grow big, but you will. You for it?"

"Anything," said Bitt, wearily, "where I can get five years of sleep while my wounds heal—without fear of attack. Mexico it is."

Sober-faced, their deep wells of enthusiasm dry, they shook hands and wasted no time making a start. That night they rolled into their blankets in a clump of timber, at the edge of the Tellico Plain. A wind whispered in from the north, rustling the tree tops, breathing of the doom sweeping Lee's armies into oblivion. And Bitt dreamed of lank Jeff Davis, father of the Confederacy, who stood like a frail bulwark against the rushing tide of defeat.

CHAPTER TWO

Trail Boss

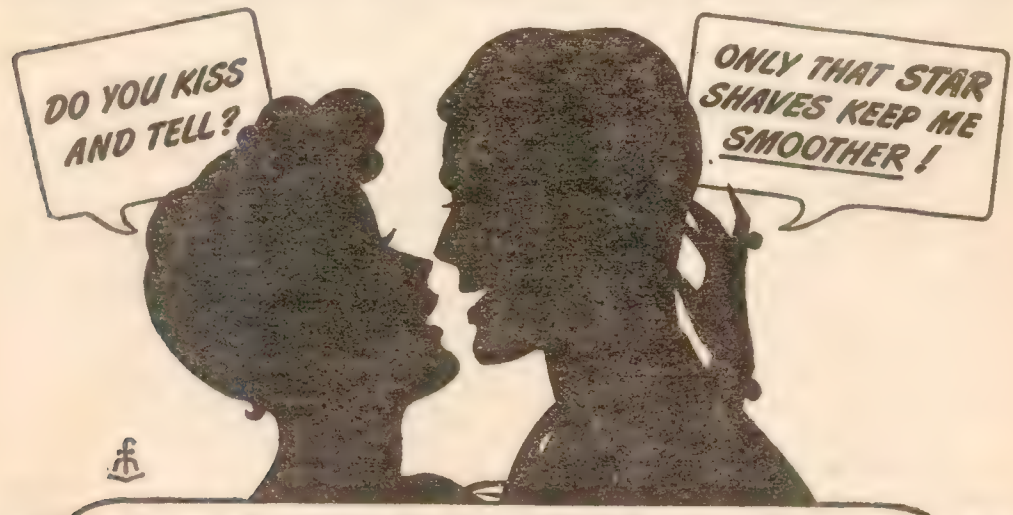
FIFTEEN years is a far span on the lusty pages of youth. Bitt Bynum, the boy, had become Brett Selling, the man. A drooping mustache, almost white hair and the angular molding of long saddle whacking, these left little about Brett, cowman

and drover of Colonia Dedilla, to remind one of gawky, teen-aged Bitt Bynum, the guerrilla.

From Parral, far below the Border, to Montana's Milk River men knew of Brett Selling, feared or admired him according to their lights. Devil's River, El Paso, Abilene, Dodge, all had heard the echoes of his guns. His cattle and horse outfit, located in the Santa Clara Valley, was in the still capable hands of Old Sunday Bynum. It released Brett's energies to the business of supplying Border buyers with beef to shove up the long trail to the Kansas railhead.

Good drovers were scarce. Brett, demanding and getting top pay, had taken a herd up the Goodnight and Chisholm Trails to Abilene. And, later, another to the lush Montana grasslands. On a trail rugged with hazards, Brett taught his crews to handle trouble guerrilla fashion: reins in the teeth, a blazing six-shooter in each fist. It had paid well.

Compared with the fighting under Quantrell, this was like picking chickens. Brett's gun rep grew. Cowmen, drovers, men with



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private scores to settle, all bid high for his services. Legends grew up around this taciturn, chill-eyed trail boss who owned his spread in Mexico. And men are prone to read into legend more than there really is.

Down around Colonia Dedilla, where fingerlike Sierran ridges splay out into the plain, others of Brett's kind had settled, encouraged by Mexican government paternalism. These Yankee haters worked and built, saved and grew rich, never forgetting the cause they still refused to consider lost. To a man, they dreamed of a leader who would rally them, lead them against the enemy. Even their sons, who had not known the poison of the sanguinary struggle, throbbed with the virus of crusade. Born proselyters, they never overlooked a bet to swell their numbers, to encourage new settlers with secessionist leanings. They had grown to a goodly number.

Nor was this transplanted Confederate legion without a plan. Their spiritual leader was Old Sunday Bynum. In his late sixties, he shamed far younger men with his deathless patriotism. From the day he had settled in Colonia Dedilla, Sunday had worked his plan. Colonists, young and old, were enrolled in the dashing Quantrell Guards. All youths were trained in the use of arms, given the rudiments of horsemanship before they could walk. When word came, after Appomattox, that Jeff Davis was a prisoner in Fortress Monroe, there was an immediate call to meeting.

"There's our man," preached Sunday Bynum. "Old Jeff belongs here, with his people. We'll choose our time an' surprise the Yankees, bust into that tater crate an' fetch Jeff here to plan for us an' lead us. It won't be easy an' it'll cost money. We can do it, like this. . . ."

And so the Quantrell Guard, already sworn by terrible oaths to loyalty, pledged itself anew to a campaign of tithing: every man to give a tenth of his earnings to a fund to free Jeff Davis and bring him to Colonia Dedilla, buy arms and ammunition and make ready for the "day." Only men imbued with such fiery ardor could have called it anything but crack-brained.

Fanatically, the colonists tithed, turning a tenth of their earnings over to the old guerrilla, whose treasury was as secret as the plan. The sum grew amazingly. A special guerrilla guard of fifty men was organized to effect the delivery of Jeff Davis, given special training. A man was dispatched to Virginia to scout the ground and organize the underground stations. He was gone a year. He returned with the astounding news that an amnesty act had passed Congress, that Davis had been freed and had gone to Canada.

In a way, it was a setback; in another, not. Two men were sent to Toronto to meet with Jeff Davis and, if possible, to return with him. They too were gone almost a year. The word they bore was heartbreaking. Jeff Davis had left Canada and gone to Europe in search of health lost in fetters and the cell at Fortress Monroe. Nobody knew when he would return or if he would return.

It was a case of waiting then, and tithing and making ready. The colony grew and prospered during the seventies. Old Sunday still preached his fiery patriotism, still collected tithes from an ever-growing settlement of Southern sympathizers. Many speculated on the size of the hoard; only Sunday knew.

THROUGH all this, Brett worked hard building up his cattle herds against the ever-growing demand for beef at the Border. Returning from one of his first trips to the Line with a trail herd, he brought news that Jeff Davis was living in Mississippi, at a place called Beauvoir.

Grim faced, Sunday Bynum packed a mule and set out on his twenty-five hundred mile ride. He was gone so long there was murmuring among his followers that he had absconded with the "Victory Fund." Brett waited on the ringleaders of this rumor mongering and it ceased. Then came the day when, weary, trailworn, noticeably aged but more enthusiastic than ever, Sunday came home and called the Guard together. He had good and bad to report.

He had met Jeff Davis and enjoyed long talks with him. The one time President of the Confederate States of America was in questionable health, content to meet with friends of sterner days and work away at his memoirs. He had cautioned against any resumption of the rebellion, opining that it was lost on the battlefield and was too dead to be revived.

Bitterly disappointed, Sunday had left the broken leader and, for a year or more,

had ridden from one Southern State to another, finding an enthusiastic response to his plan and energetic cooperation. Throughout the south, chapters of the Guards were now being organized along the lines of Colonia Dedilla, with tithing the heart and soul of their hopes. In five years, maybe as many as ten, millions would be available. Then a congress would convene to plan the renewal of conflict and appoint leaders, military, financial and political. Pending that time, they would drill and save and prepare for a struggle far more stern than the last.

Through all this, Brett maintained a moody silence, taking no part in the discussions, hoping way down deep that conflict would never come to pass. Youth is quick to forget the unpleasantries of life, and while he had not forgotten the slaughter of his kinfolks, these things were far outweighed by the deathless memories of hordes of finely equipped soldiers pouring out of the north, of his saddlemates being killed, one after another, of odds that would be lengthened rather than lessened as the years passed. The North was too rich, too strong.

A few days after the return of his father, Brett started three thousand cattle northward, beef consigned to the Sioux reservation, at Standing Rock, in far North Dakota. His crew, eleven trusted and trail broke men, had already taken the cattle out and Brett lingered for a farewell with the crusty old-timer he had scarcely seen in two long years. He held the hard, calloused hand, taking stock of new lines in the weathered face, the marks of advancing age, the fierce, eagle-like glints in the faded eyes.

"Take it, easy, dad. You've earned a rest."

A faint smile touched the stern eyes. "If I rest, I die, son. There's a lot uh work for everybody, if we're ever to drive the damn Yankees out of the South. Take care of yoreself, 'cause the time ain't fur off when I'll dump a real load onto them wide shoulders uh your'n."

"You don't need to worry about me, dad."

"Know that, son. Keep a weather eye peeled for Barlow Sackett's whelp Omer. You ain't forgettin' our oath to take our pay in blood?"

"I ain't forgot, dad. Adios."

Brett turned to a big Negro who stood soberly by. He stood several inches over six feet and was possessed of terrible strength. Segundo at the Bar Twin Star Bar—a brand adopted by Old Sunday in honor of the Confederate flag—this colored boy excelled at everything that goes to make a tophand. Called by the Mexicans Don Cisco—Mister Coal Dust—he was arrayed in wide, braid-trimmed sombrero, charro jacket, red silk shirt and laced pants of the *caballero*. There was nothing about him to remind a man of chubby-faced Snowball, around whose freedom the beginnings of the Sackett-Bynum feud had swirled. Yet, save for added years and size, he was the same.

Brett took the black man's hand. "Look after him, Snowball. Don't let the Old Man work himself to death."

"No, suh." Snowball grinned widely. "Not ef Ah gotta hogtie him, Marse Brett." His smile faded. "Sho' am sorry Ah cain't go up de trail dis time."

"Mebbyso next time, Snowball. See you in the late summer." Brett rode away without looking back at the womanless place that had become home. And worry rode at his stirrup. Not worry about the long, dangerous trail stretching ahead, for that was in his own hands, but worry over the increasing activity at Bar Twin Star Bar. After all, they were now citizens of Mexico. If the government at Mexico City got wind of the conspiracy. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Warning on the Trail

THE herd wearing the Bar Twin Star Bar road brand wound out of the blackjacks, sniffed water and broke into a lumbering run-bawl toward distant Salt Fork. Brett swung wide from his position at point. "Water yonder!" he yelled. "Sift back an' tell the boys to fan 'em out, Baldy. Ain't had water since the Cimarron an' they'll sure try to pile up. Tell that Sandy kid to let the remuda drift an' take care of the drags!"

Baldy Marlowe, the segundo, whirled his pony and raced back before Brett finished. He had been up the Trail before and knew well the danger. As he galloped, he gathered riders out of the dust pall, led them

back to throw pressure westward against the drag. Brett, his quirt cracking against his scarred bullhide chaps, raced down the left swing, sending riders forward to turn the leaders eastward. No excitement. No confusion. Every man had been through the mill, knew just what to do and how to do it.

The cattle were running now and, over their frantic bawling sounded the shrill *"Hi, hi, hi, hika!" of* the busy cowboys. Slowly the drive seemed to pivot on its center until the herd swept riverward sidewise, two or three or four head deep and covering a front of better than half a mile. And so they hit the river, plunged through the scattered timber and into the water, sending spray high, their muzzles in the sluggish flow before they could check their drive.

With the beef safe now from injury, riders emerged from the hanging dust curtain, brown, bearded men with steely nerves and nothing to hint that a long day lay behind them, without food or water since before dawn. More than half of them were veterans of bitter losing campaigns in the war. The rest, younger, had known the agony of reconstruction, of migration and the struggle to root their feet on foreign soil. Not a man thought of his own comfort until he had helped take the horse herd upstream to clear water, then move them out onto the sere grass.

The wagon had pulled into the willows, near the stream, and Potlikker Deese, the cook, already had his fire started and his dutch ovens heating. Cowboys were the last to drink. Cocktail shift was set and the rest rode to the wagon to bolt beef and beans and bannock and wash them down with great mugs of hot, black coffee.

BRETT tolled off men for the first guard and they rode out to the herd as the first tendrils of dusk crept across the waving grass of the prairie. Beds were dragged from the "hoodlum" and spread out. Weary men reclined with their cigarettes.

The cook, banging away at his cleaning of pots and pans, suddenly grew silent. "Two hawssbackers lopin' in from the north!" There was a shifting of eyes. A faint echo of hoofbeats on the sod. A resonant hail. "Hello the camp!"

Brett came to his feet. "Light, *amigos,* an' cool the saddles." He got friendliness into his tone but he was stiff and he and his men were tense, ready for trouble. The two strangers reined in, dismounted, loosened their *cinchas.* One was a man, gaunt, bony shouldered, lithe legged. Whang leather strength showed in every line of him. Dark hair, worn long after the frontier fashion, tumbled from the line of his wide hat. A tied-down, bone-handled six-shooter lay against his right thigh. His dark, bushy beard failed to hide the wide scar that pinched in his left cheek, lifting his lips in a perpetual smile. There was something bold, challenging, reckless in the way he poised to look them over.

"What outfit, gents?"

"Bar Twin Star Bar, out of the Santa Clara Valley, Mexico."

"Mexico, eh?" The man came to the fire, warming himself against the faint chill creeping into the bottoms. "That's a fur piece from here."

The graceful boy joined him at the fire. He too wore a tied-down gun, his spurs clanking as he strode. He took off his hat, letting chestnut curls drop around his shoulders. And a gust of breath roughed from Brett's lungs. The boy was a girl!

The man, noting the sudden stir among the trail hands, laughed softly and with evident amusement. "My niece, gents. Aurora Caddock. I'm Trev Freer. No need uh you boys feelin' gal shy. Aurie's able to hold her own with most any man. Tophand with hawses an' cattle an' no slow joe with that hoglaig she's wearin'."

Silence fell as they regarded her. She was dusty from long riding and there were circles of weariness about her powder grey eyes and the hint of a forlorn droop to the corners of her lips. But she was pretty, Brett had to admit that.

"You won't find our manners up to entertainin' ladies, ma'am," Brett said, awkwardly. "But it ain't that we don't appreciate havin' one visit us. What can we do for you? Had supper?"

"Right nice of you," said Trav Freer, who looked in his middle thirties. "Aurie an' me, we'd admire to take supper now an' every night until you cross the Arkansas."

"Meaning you want a job?" Brett grinned.

"What you might call temporary employment, Selling."

Brett shook his head. "Temporary or permanent, the answer's the same. I'm full handed. But tie into Potlikker's slum just like you belonged."

Freer made no show of disappointment, if he felt it. Smiling that fixed smile, he led the girl to the rawhide covered mess-box, fished out plate and cup and artillery and they served themselves liberally. No words were spoken while they ate. Not until the tinware had been tossed into Potlikker's waiting soapsuds and tobacco smoke blended with the fumes of a buffalo-chip fire was there further talk.

The girl gave no heed to the surprise of men seeing a girl, other than a Mexican, shape a cigarette and pull the smoke into her lungs. Trav Freer sucked a pipe, his half-lidded eyes thoughtful as he scanned the backdrop of night behind the northern skyline. "Trail from here to the Arkansas ain't what a man would call paved with good intentions, Selling."

"I've been up it a time or two, Freer. I've tasted the bitter of it an' spoke my piece an' taken my cattle through. It'll be like that, I reckon."

"Mebbyso. Mebbyso not. Still an' all, two straight guns ain't to be sneezed at when somewheres between fifteen-twenty men are layin' along the trail just waitin' for the Bar Twin Star Bar beef to try to pass."

BRETT showed no surprise. "That's about the size of the last outfit to try me, harvestin' nothin' but some hardpan grave diggin' for their pains."

"I know, but it's different this time. They're layin' for you, Selling. You wouldn't remember the name Catesby?"

"I should," said Brett, grimly. "Last summer I killed Bill Catesby in the Longhorn Saloon, in Ellsworth. He wouldn't have it no other way. Him and me, we'd had trouble the year before. I rubbed him the wrong way. Reckon I looked like another nick in his gun handle. What about it?"

"Bill was a cousin of Jeff, Milt an' Flint Catesby. Them last three is bad hombres, Selling. They're in Caldwell now, jest waitin'. Drinkin' the Drover's Saloon dry, makin' their brags an' layin' their bets."

"Bets?"

"They're layin' three tuh one you'll never cross the Arkansas. I've bucked a lot worse gambles than that in my time, so I taken a thousand of it."

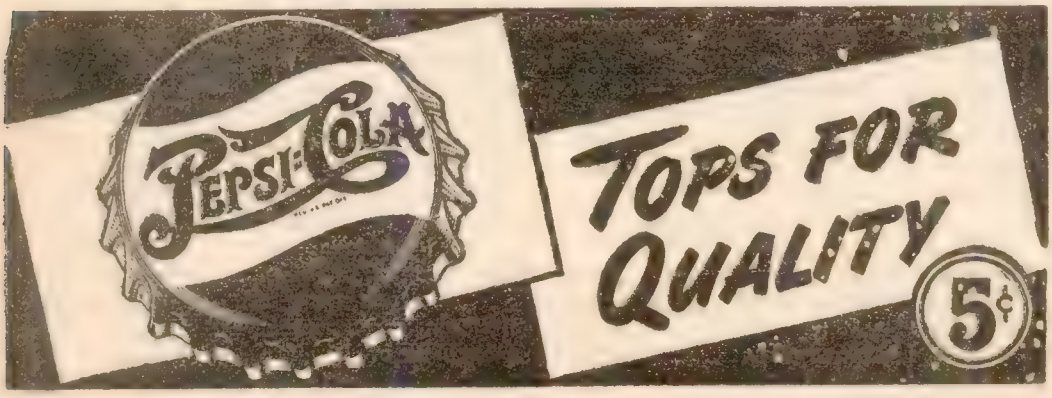
"Uncle," smiled the girl, "is a hopeless gambler. He'll bet on anything, anywhere. Then move heaven and earth to make his bet pay off."

"I see." Brett sifted flake tobacco into brown paper and twisted up a smoke. He handed the sack to Freed, who murmured, "thanks," and stoked his pipe again before he spoke.

"That's right, Selling. I'm not here just for the fun of eatin' trail dust for a hundred or so miles. I'm only protecting my bet, an' you—well, you'll be out grub for two for—well, mebby eight-ten days, an' the loan of some blankets."

"Looks like," said Brett, tartly, "you'd rate your women folks as important as your bets."

The girl and the man laughed, as if the idea were funny. Freer said, "Aurie? When they hit us, she'll do more fightin' than any of us. If she's a mind to, she can hop her Rabbit horse an' run away from



anything the Catesby's have got. Don't worry about her."

"Heavens no," begged the girl, her eyes sparkling at Brett.

They waited then and Brett pondered. Baldy Marlow got out his banjo and sang softly.

"Come along, boys, an' lissen to my tale,
I'll tell you of my troubles on the Old Chisholm Trail,
Come uh ki-yi-yippee-yippe yay, yippee yay,
Come uh ki-yi-yippee. . . ."

Something in the night seemed to discourage him and he fell silent, idly picking out chords. Brett said, "Bar Twin Star Bar's a clanny outfit, Freer. Ain't much on takin' up with strangers that mebbyso don't think like we do. But I'm makin' a exception in your case."

"I take it kindly," murmured Freer. "An' I think I savvy what you mean. The Catesby was allowin' it'd be a extra special pleasure to rub out a Johnny-cake rebel outfit from the Bloody Border." His brows knitted and his lips drew down. "Their talk was sand in my old wounds an' I called their hand. You see, I happened to know they was with Jim Lane's murderin', thievin' Jayhawkers, the kit an' caboodle of 'em. Was a time when their belly wind would have set me to shootin', not bettin'."

"Yeah?" Brett regarded him, narrow eyed. "You was with . . . ?"

"Marmaduke's Bushwhackers. You?"

"Guerrillas."

"Ah!" Freer grinned, gleefully. "We must uh bin pretty close when your boss an' mine got together. You mind the time? North of Spring River it was, in '63. We was headed north an' met your outfit. Quantrell bet Marmaduke he could kill the Yankee general, Obediah Smith, with his own gun. Remember? Done it, too. Saluted the general, asked to look at his pistol an' shot him dead, riddin' Cedar County of the worst devil in Missouri. Some man, Quantrell."

Brett nodded, still eyeing the man. "You from Missouri?"

"Neosho, in Newton County." Freer grinned. "But not under the name of Freer. Too many Yankee lovers still beatin' the brush for neighbors that rode with the losin' side. You?"

"Same answer," said Brett, grudgingly. "Man wearing the name he traveled by in them bloody days is layin' himself wide open to a bushwhack bullet. Some men just naturally don't let old wounds heal. Ever run across a feller name uh Omer Sackett?"

Freer blinked. "Sackett. . . . Sackett. They was lots uh Sacketts in Kansas an' Missouri. Nope, I never cut Omer's sign. I kin see in your eyes you'd like most mortal to meet up with that feller. I kin see you want that, bad."

"Yeah." Brett's voice was husky. "A human snake, too low down to deserve the right to go on livin', if he's still alive. It's gettin' late. Get blankets off the wagon. The lady can sleep there. We start the critters at sunup."

CHAPTER FOUR

Trail Wolves

LAZILY, the below-the-border herd wound northward. Past Caldwell. Across the Chicaskia. The men wary and watchful by day; double guard at night. Ready and waiting for the stroke that was as certain as the morrow's sun.

Freer, soon a favorite with the men because of his fund of stories and anecdotes of the late war, his eagerness to be of help and, more particularly because he was the uncle of the pretty girl riding at point with Brett, showed great interest in the colony of misplaced Confederates, in Mexico. He showed enthusiasm for the venture, opining it was something he would like to have a hand in building. And so, because in a few short days he became so much one of them, the men told him of the tithing, the fund to revive the Lost Cause.

The wagon camps became gay, maybe to cover up the growing tension. Baldy Marlow strummed the banjo and Aurora Caddock sang the sad ballads of the day and, after they had taught her the words, the rollicking songs of the cattle country and the sultry Mexican airs. They came to love her, even Brett who was known as a woman hater. He would sit with his arms about his knees, staring at her transfigured face as she sang, his emotions stirred as never before. When she tried to talk to him, at point, his tongue grew thick and awkward

and he could not frame the speeches he yearned to make.

They drove hard and late to reach the South Fork of the Ne-Ne Squaw, were too weary, too strung up to indulge in the usual campfire pleasantries. If the Catesbys struck, it must be soon. Three days more would see them beyond the Arkansas.

Supper over and guard set, the fire was allowed to die and men lay, fully clothed, on their blankets, wide awake. Somewhere near, a fox barked insistently. A full moon rode majestically up behind black cloud-banks, where lightning played fitfully. Out at the herd, a circling rider crooned to the bedded steers. . . .

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie-e-e-e,
In a narrow grave. . . ."

Brett stared out across the prairie, thinking of Aurie, up yonder in the wagon, wondering how he could contrive to say the things that were crowding his heart. The moon was obscured, glooming the soft picture of the plain, rising easily from the winding stream, of short grass rippling in the gentle night breeze. When the moon came out, the picture had changed. Ranged along the skyline were riders, a lot of them, moving down toward the herd. Brett came up.

"Scatter out!" he barked. He broke for his staked horse, grazing with drawn cinch. His men were right with him. Freer came off his bed, running. Aurie quit the wagon, a carbine in her hands. Out yonder a shot woke startling echoes. The singer chopped off his song and one of the advancing renegades screamed as he died.

With a great *whoosh* of drawn breath, the steers came up, trembling, poised. The raiders came like demons, yelling like Indians, their guns flaming. With a thunder and clash and crash of hoof and horn, the herd gave way to its terror and broke into mad flight, smashing through the sparse timber and northward. Three men, well trained at their task, stayed with the herd. The rest turned to meet the invaders.

Wedged in his saddle, his spurs hung in the cinch, the reins in his teeth and a gun in each fist, Brett's mind bridged the good years to the bloody days of long ago. There were riders at his stirrup now, as then, fearless men trained to kill and knowing how to die. It was easy to think of them as Todd and Younger, Shepherd and Jarrett, Hoy and Toler and Jesse James and all the rest of the imperishables who had vanished in the mists of defeat. A wild rebel yell broke from his lungs and his pistols were spitting, as they had at Little Blue and Lone Jack and Lawrence.

Four yelling, shooting devils, one of whom was Trav Freer, broke across the line of raiders who would have continued after the herd they coveted. Men reeled and fell from their saddles, to be tramped and ridden into the sod. Horses pitchpoled, hurling their riders. Panic took these renegades who had never faced guerrilla fire. They turned back and bolted, shooting as they went. Brett's horse, struck mortally, screamed and fell. Brett stepped clear, watching his three companions and several others from another quarter, spur in swift pursuit.

For the moment it was a Bar Twin Star Bar victory, but only for a moment. They were badly outnumbered and the Catesbys were rallying their riders. They rolled Brett's men back. Potlikker was shot off his horse. Another cowboy called Pie Willy had his pony shot from under him and was riddled as he ran. The second attack swept down on Brett and he was firing, taking toll of them. And then hands grasped him and a voice said, "Down, Brett. In here!" It was Aurie.

She pulled him down into a small wallow and over its lip they sent their leaden messengers at the dark, swiftly charging blots against the prairie grass, the roar of their guns blending. Milt Catesby, cursing, shooting, leading the attack, was unhorsed and left behind. Jeff, his brother, turned back for him and was killed by Brett's bullet as he took Milt up behind. Milt fell with him, wounded.

The raiders split around this depressed outpost, whirled and came back. Lead stirred dirt at the parapet. "Selling's in that hole, damn him!" howled Flint Catesby, "Root him outa there or die!"

They came with a rush and a yell, eager to wipe out the pair in the hole. They were met by the deadly six-shooters of a one-time guerrilla and the carbine of a girl who could bark a squirrel at a hundred yards when she was ten. Horses fell. Men charging afoot were mowed down like a

scythe. And then Brett's reorganized riders came slashing in to blast away the last threat to the herd. Flint Catesby fled with such of his men as were able. The popping thunder of pursuit died away across the skyline.

Brett stirred, shoving shells into his hot gun. "Hurt, pardner?"

"Sand cuts on my face and a scratch or two, Brett. You?"

"Couple of nicks, thanks to you. I should raise hell with you for comin' out like you did to pull me down. Don't you know you could have been killed?"

She said, "All I knew was that you'd be killed, Brett."

He wanted to ask her if that made any difference. He wanted to recall some of the pretty speeches he had dreamed. But there she was, propped on her elbow only inches from him, a terrible earnestness on her face, her smoky eyes bright behind the mist of tears. And suddenly her arms were about his neck and she was pressed against him, her lips on his. And Brett, kissing her hungrily, knew there was no other girl in all the world, no project on earth half so important as taking her back to Colonia Dedilla to queen the Bar Twin Star Bar.

THEY broke apart as riders came from two ways, rose and moved out. Baldy Marlow came from the north, gloating over what he saw. "Herd's safe, Brett. We run 'em two-three miles, put 'em into a twist an' the bays are circling' again, easin' their feelin's. How'd you make out?"

"With a fighter like Aurie," said Brett, "how do you think?"

"An' like Freer," said Old Rankin Russell, leading men in after abandoning the chase. "That feller's a he-badger if ever I seen one. Swallered a couple slugs too, but he's rearin' to go. Better sign him on, boss."

"He's hoorawin' yuh, Selling," from Freer.

"I've lost some men an' I'm short handed," said Brett, soberly. "I'd admire to have you join us, Freer. Potlikker's gone an' if Aurie's willing, we'll be almighty happy to eat her cookin'."

"How about it, Uncle?" There was a tremulous eagerness in Aurie's voice.

Freer shook his head. "Like to, finest kind, Selling. Never rode with a more congenial outfit. But I got business down in Tombstone. Friend uh mine, Doc Holliday, is holdin' a poker spot for me, in the Oriental Saloon. Then they's a little matter of three thousand due me at the Drover's Saloon, in Caldwell. I'll get your horse, Aurie. We can make it yet tonight."

He turned his pony toward the wagon, the men riding with him. Brett and the girl stared at one another in the moonlight. "That . . . that kiss," stammered Brett. "It wasn't just something I take an' forget, Aurie."

"It wasn't something I gave just to leave you more lonely, Brett. I knew all the time we could not stay, even if you wanted us."

"You're going to Tombstone." There was new confidence in Brett's voice. "I'll drop through there on my way back from Dakota. They tell me there's churches there an' sky pilots that can tie a wedding knot hard an' fast."

She eyed him archly. "Are you proposing to me, Brett Selling?"

"I never saw a woman I wanted to be hitched to, ma'am, till I saw you."

A little laugh touched her lips and she moved close to him, raised on tiptoe and kissed him. And then her gayness was gone. "I honor you for that, Brett, but we probably won't be in Tombstone when you get there. We never stay long in any one place. It's . . . it's better if you never see me again."

"Why?"

"I . . . I can't tell you why. Just take my word for it." Freer was calling her. "Coming, Uncle." She touched his arm and turned away, breaking into a run. She hit the waiting saddle and spurred away. Freer touched his animal and followed her, lifting his hand in a silent farewell. Aurie was looking back through the moonlight as they vanished over the rise.

"Graves for Potlikker an' Pie Willy." There was a new hardness in Brett's voice. There would be weeping at Colonia Dedilla when they returned.

CHAPTER FIVE

Volunteer Expatriate

FALL was tinting the quaking aspens with fiery shades of red and yellow as Brett led the Bar Twin Star Bar southward along the east toe of the Rockies, heading

home. At Trinidad, he turned the remuda and better than forty thousand dollars into the care of Baldy Marlow.

"Sell what horses you can along the Pecos," he ordered, "an' turn this money over to Sunday. Tell him I'll be along directly."

"An' you?" asked the segundo.

"I'm takin' a *pasear* into Arizona . . . on business."

Baldy grinned. "Couldn't be you're on the trail of that Aurie filly, Brett?"

"That's an idea to make talk over, around your campfires," grinned Brett, non-committally. "See you about first frost in the Santa Clara."

He sat on a headland, watching the dust of the horseherd move southward, torn between loneliness at the parting and love that had grown to an agony inside him. Finally he stepped into the saddle and rode westward, climbing toward the Raton Pass. In Taos and later in Santa Fe, he found the people still excited, still with one main subject of conversation. The scourge of the Pecos had fallen before the gun of Pat Garrett, Sheriff of Lincoln. The earth was not yet settled on the grave of the stripling killer who had snuffed out twenty-one lives at the age of twenty-one. Billy the Kid was dead!

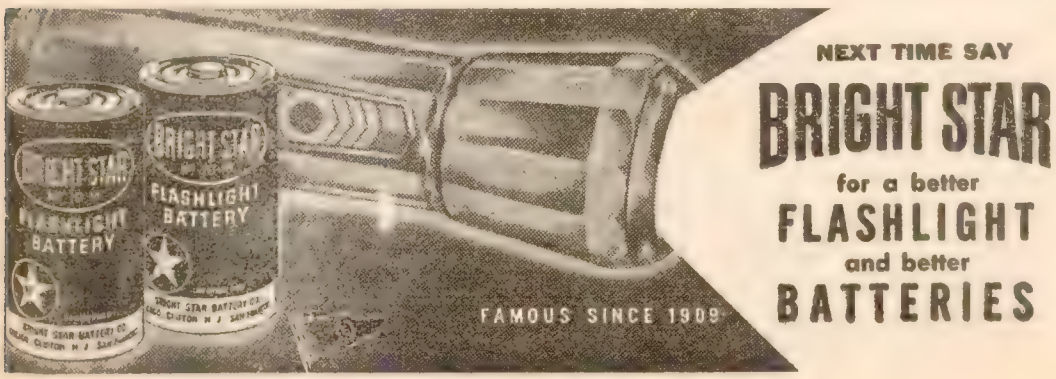
Albuquerque, Socorro, Lordsburg, Fort Bowie, southward and westward from Santa Fe Brett picked up increasingly echoing rumors of trouble in Tombstone. He rode into the brawling silver metropolis on the twenty-second of October. The town was seething. Two hours before, Wyatt, Virgil and Morgan Earp and Doc Holliday had shot it out with the Clantons and McLowerys, in the O.K. Corral. Three stalwart, six foot Earps, strangely alike with their hard, square jaws, their tawny hair and mustaches, marching unafraid upon the guns of their enemies, sided by the bitter, emaciated gambler whose hatreds were badges on his skinny chest, whose courage was already a legend.

Tom and Frank McLowery and Billy Clanton were on slabs at the undertaker's. Virgil and Morgan Earp lay in the hospital. Wyatt Earp stalked the town like an aroused lion, defying the pack, looking just as Brett had seen him in Dodge, two years before. Doc Holliday, drinking steadily, stood about with his cronies, taunting those sworn to back up the dead men, daring any or all to take up the unsettled argument.

Brett found it hard to get the excited town to listen to his queries. Where, in the face of this elemental struggle, this drama of life and death, was there room to discourse upon the whereabouts of one gambler, where there were so many; of a pretty girl in a town renowned for its beautiful women?

Late that night, Brett braced Wyatt Earp in the Oriental, of which he was part owner. And though the great man's heart must have been heavy with worry for his wounded brothers and doubt as to the next move of his enemies, he could still smile and take Brett's hand in a firm grip.

"I remember you and your Mexican outfit, Selling," he said. "Especially the way you kept your boys in hand while they cut loose in Dodge. At a time when the Texans were intent on nothing but raising hell, it is something not soon to be forgotten. Trav Freer? He dealt farobank here until it began to cloud up for trouble. He did all right by us and we were satisfied with him,



but he was a little too friendly with Curly Bill and figured to pull out before he had to take sides. Left about a month ago. The girl I didn't know. Can't say if she was with him."

Doc Holliday, coming up at that moment, allowed that Freer's niece was with him when he drove out of Tombstone in a covered buggy drawn by a fast team. "Told me he was headed for El Paso to set up a game."

So Brett quit dangerously boiling Tombstone and headed east for El Paso. Here again he was disappointed. His man had acted as house gambler in the Bullshead Saloon for a brief span. In an argument over his baize, he had shot and killed a man, had faced trial, been acquitted and vanished. That was all. Morosely, with none of his usual buoyancy, Brett turned his pony across the bridge and toward the Santa Clara Valley. His dream was dead. Aurie Caddock had said it was better so. Even though she might be wrong, where in all the great Southwest could he hope to find her?

His eyes turned toward the high Sierras, their caps dusted with first snow, and he thought pleasantly of the long cottonwood lane leading to the century old Bar Twin Star Bar ranch house, of seamed and grizzled Sunday Bynum with the flaming eye and the dreams of empire that would live on in the hearts of patriots. He thought of reunion with his trail crew, wondering if they would ever again trail northward through a land ever more restricted by plowman's fence. Railroads were building everywhere, even in Mexico. What did the future hold for him, his neighbors at Colonia Dedilla and those folks everywhere below the Mason-Dixon Line who tithed blindly for battle?

SET between two protecting arms of the downreaching hills, the Bar Twin Star Bar felt little of the gusty wind whipping the flats, that sun-bright, chill day in late November. In the long living room, fire leaped and roared in the fireplace. Across the colorful Oaxaca rugs clothing the worn plank floor, Old Sunday Bynum paced restlessly, chewing an unlighted cigar to shreds. Though past sixty-five, never sparing of strength or energy and inclined to worry, the years had dealt leniently with him. Only a hint of grey spoiled the black sheen of hair and beard. His body was straight, his gait jerky with the restlessness of one of great vigor. He had thrown off the effects of wounds, exposure and dogging weariness that had broken many another better man in the war. And now again he was punishing himself.

The seeds of rebellion he had planted in his long ride through the South; what of them? Sacred promises had been made to keep him informed, but he had heard nothing. Time and again, he had been tempted to make the crusade again, to breathe into new chapters the life and health and vigor characterizing Colonia Dedilla. He would have gone too, save that Brett had not returned. The boy was gallivanting around Arizona, on the trail of some female, according to Baldy Marlow. Six months and nearly another and he was not yet home. When he returned. . . .

He heard the shrill whinny of a horse, turned his eyes outside. A buggy was wheeling up the cottonwood lane toward the house. He watched the rig turn to the rack before the door, the tall man step out and tie the team, then hand out a beautiful girl with the ceremony of Southern courtesy.

He saw Snowball, the big Negro, step up to them, bowing, then point to the door. "Now who can this be?" muttered Sunday, moving to the door. He let them in, warming to the girl's smile, noting the scarred granite face and chill eyes of the man. "I'm Sunday Bynum, folks," he said. "You wish to see me?"

"I'm Trav Freer," said the man, and gave his hand. "My niece, sir. Miss Aurie Caddock."

Sunday nodded, with some satisfaction. "Reckon you're the two who won a bet by fightin' for my cattle. My segundo told me all about it. Allow me to thank you an' welcome you to the rancho. Take seats." He called through a door and presently a Mexican girl came with tall drinks of mescal, sliced lemon, salt and a decanter of water. "Sorry I can't offer you a mint julep, folks. What brings you to the Santa Clara?"

They sat there, pleasantly warm before the fire, the girl searching the frontier comfort of the great adobe house, the man talking easily. He had, he said, been more than a little impressed by knowledge of the plan to restore the Confederacy, knowledge

gleaned from Brett Selling's trail crew. Being a dyed-in-the-wool Southern sympathizer, having bled for the South under Marmaduke and shocked beyond measure by the surrender at Appomattox, he had never ceased to hope that the issue might be somehow reversed.

"Hearing of the growth of your movement in Texas," he added, "I presented my credentials to the El Paso chapter and was admitted to membership. . . ."

"You have them credentials with you?" asked Sunday, coldly business now and not pleased by knowledge his men had talked on the trail.

Freer smiled. "Unfortunately not, Mister Bynum. I wanted to meet you first. My papers are at the house."

"House? What house?"

"I came south to meet you, Mister Bynum. I look on you as the father of the movement and the logical candidate for President, or speaker of the Congress, when our *de facto* government is set up. One look at your beautiful valley and I told my niece this was the place for us. So I have bought the Rancho Carrizo, five miles north. You know the property, of course?"

"I ought to," said Sunday, solemnly. "Don Pablo has been my friend an' neighbor for close to twenty year. Where's he now?"

"A fine gentleman, Pablo Montoya. He is my guest pending the settling of certain private affairs. He will soon be leaving to visit relatives in Zacatecas. I hope you will come over real soon to bid him goodbye and allow me to deliver a report of the state of chapters, entrusted to my care."

A sigh gusted from Sunday's lungs. "At last," he said. "I was to have one every three months. I've waited nine. If Brett hadn't been away, I'd have left before this to find out what the matter was. . . ."

"Mister Selling's not here?" asked Aurora Caddock, an inflection of disappointment in her voice.

Sunday's eyes twinkled, admiring her. "Last ever I heard of that feller, he was bustin' down brush gettin' to Tombstone, Arizony. Lookin' fer some gal."

Aurie Caddock blushed, murmured, "Really?" and turned her face away.

Freer rose, signing to the girl that they must depart. "When can I expect you, Mister Bynum?"

"Could make it tonight, I reckon."

"Good! Come over to supper. We'll sit down at seven."

"Nice of you, Freer. But I reckon I'll be sorta rusty settin' down to table with a beautiful young lady."

Freer was short. "We'll eat alone, Bynum, you and me. No small talk tonight. I want to arrange to talk to your chapter, then join it. Our cause must be speeded up."

"Right. We'll be pleased to lissen, Freer. An' we're right pleased to have Rancho Carrizo tithin'. Dan Pablo was our friend but no Mexican could ever be one of us."

"I'll do better than tithe, Bynum," Freer smiled expansively as he moved doorward. "Tonight you'll have a draft on my Denver bank for fifty thousand dollars."

"Whee-ew!" Sunday whistled, grinning gleefully. "That's amazin' generous of you, Freer. Thank ye." He stood in the doorway, the breeze parting his whiskers, watch them drive away. He was deeply moved, exalted, ashamed that he had mistrusted this man at first. That, of course, was the cynical smile born of Freer's scar. Freer was all right. Thousands such, throughout the Southern states, would be backing their dream of restored Confederacy with cold cash. Could the Yankees match that devotion?

CHAPTER SIX

Dream Lost—Dream Regained

AT SIX, that evening, with darkness already growing full, Sunday Bynum saddled his personal horse, hollered to Snowball, "I'll be gone two-three hours, boy," and galloped away, down the cottonwood lane. He might have been more explicit save that he was absent minded, his thoughts heavily on Freer's contribution, on the contents of the report and how hard it would be to say farewell to an old friend like Don Pablo.

Wind shrieked about the squat adobes of Rancho Carrizo. Save for a single gleam from a house window there was no light anywhere. Sunday experienced a momentary chill of apprehension, rejected it as he did all fear and pounded on the door. He waited, rapped again and heard footsteps on the inner tiles.

A bolt shot back. The door swung open. Freer stood there, that crooked smile twisting his lips upward. "Hello, Neighbor Bynum. We're waiting for you."

Sunday whirled to the scuff of a boot behind him. His hand shot to his belted gun. Three shadows converged upon him from gloomy angles of the arcade. He jerked his weapon free. Something struck him heavily from behind. His brain flashed galaxies of colored stars. Strong hands grabbed him. Someone struck the gun from his grasp. Then he knew no more till he came out of the fog to find himself in one of Don Pablo's rawhide chairs. Sitting relaxed across from him was Trav Freer. Behind Freer stood a beefy, cat-eyed man flanked by two villainous looking Mexicans.

Sunday shook his head to clear it. His eye blazed. "What's the idea, Freer? What kind of a game you playin'?"

"Money game, Bynum. Where do you keep it?"

"Meanin' what?"

"You know. The fund tithed to further your fool plot. Where is it?"

Sunday snarled. "So that's it. You're a thief, not a patriot, Freer. Well, hell will freeze plumb over before you find out."

"Look!" Freer acted patient. "You've got a choice. You can tell where the money is and let me get to the Border with it or you can force me to some mighty tough unpleasantness. Which?"

Sunday glowered, fighting for time to clear his brain. Old memories were stirring in him. "How'd you learn what you know, Freer? Who are you?"

Freer stood up, chuckling. "Look at me, Sunday. Overlook the scar you put on me the night you hung my brother. Look at me."

"Omer Sackett!" gritted Sunday. "You fetched the feud to Mexico!"

The man grimaced. "The war burned hate of you out of me and I'd let sleepin' dogs lie except you're in my debt. I'll settle for your hundred thousand dollar fund. Dig it up! Allow me a fair start toward the Border an' I'll leave you with your fool rebellion. Fair enough?"

That hate had quit a Sackett was beyond Sunday's imagining. In his rugged old heart it could never die. He leered at his tormentor, clear headed now, his answer pat. He cocked his right leg, ankle across knee. His hand found his boottop and suddeny it held a gun—a stingy gun that had saved him more than once in those last dark days. "You Yankee thieves!" he raged, and the gun spoke.

Watchful and wary, the fat renegade behind Sackett saw it coming and drew. Sunday dropped him with a bullet in the brain. The man's gunmates flung aside, separating, drawing, shooting. Ignoring them, Sunday was set to blast away at Sackett when a bullet shattered his right arm. He held onto his weapon, shifted it and fired. Sackett was moving and the slug burned along his ribs, twisting him. A renegade popped a bullet into Sunday's chest. The old wolf, fighting his last battle, shuddered, coughed out a hoarse rebel yell. His gun spewed fire and the man who had shot him died, screaming: *"Madre de Dios!"*

A bloody haze dimmed Sunday's vision now. He swayed in his chair, peering to separate Sackett from the blur. Sackett shot him in the belly. He slumped and, through the swirling mists of death he saw Sackett aiming to finish it. He tried to lift his piece, but it was too heavy. He saw the door open behind Sackett and the girl, Aurie, dart in, crying, "No, Uncle. For God's sake, no!" She lunged for his gun arm. His swinging gun barrel smashed her in the face, felling her.

Cursing, Sunday wrenched up his weapon, fired it. The bullet sailed wide. Omer Sackett shot him between the eyes. It was over. Sackett glided to Sunday, tilted back his bloody face and was infuriated by the taunting smile lingering there. He put pressure against the body, sent it tumbling to the floor.

"The fool!" he muttered. "He damn near took it all." Turning, he searched the floor, started. "Luis, fetch in that girl. She's got to learn who's boss."

The renegade paisano left and more came streaming in the front, from the bunkhouse; tough, reckless fellows recruited in Juarez *pulquerias*. Sackett was ordering them out when Luis returned, excited.

"Por Dios, patron! The *señorita* ees go. She 'ave leave and not shut the door."

Sackett stiffened. "Gone? Hmmm, that's bad. Fetch her back or I'll skin you alive. Hunt her, all of you!" The wind had fresh-

ened and a misty rain fell as they rushed outside.

CHILLED to the bone, Brett Selling came home through a soaking downpour, after seven months on the trail. It was after midnight. The ranch was dark. Somewhere his old dog, Frisky, wailed drearily with his miseries. A fire will help him, he thought, and called the animal, which leaped toward the house before him, uttering short, sharp barks. Brett silenced the dog and, on tiptoe, followed the dark arcade to a side door giving to the living room. He saw nothing but stepped on something yielding. Thus he found the body propped against the wall. "Snowball!" he roared. "Snowball!"

"Dat you, Marse Brett?" The big darky appeared from his lean-to room, pulling on his pants. "Ah lets you in an' builds a fiah."

"What's this, Snowball?" Brett struggled with wet matches. "This is Sunday. Something's wrong." But he knew it was death. The body was cold.

The Negro made a light and they took the body inside. Somebody in the waking household made a fire on the hearth. Carmencita, the cook, wrung her hands and wept. Brett, a bedraggled figure, brooded over his father's clay. "Shot to pieces," he muttered. "Hear any shooting, Snowball?"

"No suh. Marster left befo' suppeh, 'lowin' he'd be gone two-three houahs. When he didn't come, Ah went to bed."

"Where'd he go?"

Snowball didn't know. Nobody thought of sleep. Brett sat before the fire, regretting terribly his delay in getting home, filled with self-condemnation, trying to reason out who could have slain a man who had no enemies, either among the colonists or the Mexicans. No enemies except Sackett! The feud! Brett turned to Snowball, who stood watching him like a great black watchdog, in a gloomy corner.

"Know of any strangers in the Santa Clara, Snowball? Any strangers?"

"Yas suh. Man name uh Freeuh, and his niece—a Miss Aurie—"

"What?" All the agony of his fruitless quest came back to devil Brett now.

"Yas, suh. Quality folks, dey was. He done bought de Montoya ranch. He gwine put fifty thousand dollahs in de fund, Marse Brett."

"Is that where Sunday went?" Brent recalled all the mystery of the man, Freer, an indefinable something that had grated on Brett even as the man battled for the Bar Twin Star Bar herd. "Did Sunday go to see Freer?"

"Ah don't know, suh. He nevah said so."

And there Brett had to leave it, hoping against hope his fears could be allayed before he rode to see Aurie. . . .

* * *

They buried Sunday at Bar Twin Star Bar, far from the graves of those he had loved and lost. Baldy and five of his trail hands carried the coffin to the knoll, where coyotes would sing his requiem when the moon came full. Many came to pay their last respects. Neighboring Mexican rancheros, with their families. Townsfolk at Colonia Dedilla, who had shut up shops to mourn their leader and friend. A rotund priest from the town chapel, there to offer up prayers for the departed *amigo* with whom

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he was wont to engage periodically at checkers. And colonists whose emotions were kept afire by Sunday's fervent patriotism.

Trav Freer came riding over, with an even dozen hard-bitten riders, all new to this section, men of mixed blood, all pleasantly drunk as they trudged up the hill to where Father Damion prayed over the lowering coffin.

When the first clods rattled down on the plain pine coffin and the people began to stream toward the house, where Carmencita was serving *frijoles, tortillas,* red wine and coffee, Brett strode after the man he had not seen since the battle with trail wolves, on the far Ne-Ne Squaw. "Hullo there, Freer."

The man whirled, smiled, gave his hand. "Selling! Happy to see you." He continued to smile.

"Missed you in Tombstone, Freer, an' again in El Paso. Never expected you here."

"Told you I wanted to see this country, Selling. I liked it well enough to buy Rancho Carrizo. If there's anything I can do about your trouble. . . ."

"Thanks, Freer. The servants say you're contributing damned materially to the Fund."

"Fifty thousand," Freer beamed. "I was to pay Bynum tomorrow. Now . . . well, send his successor to me."

"Successor." Brett looked wistful. "Nobody can fill Sunday's shoes. How's Aurie?"

"Under the weather, or she'd have come along." Freer winked genially. "She's right fond of you, Selling. Come visit with her, real soon."

"You can bet on that, Freer. Take your men in for a bite."

They parted. Brett, with no appetite for food or small talk, went to the room serving as ranch office. Twilight came, then darkness and the creeping chill of winter night. The chatter of guests was dim against Brett's grief. His black thoughts were on Freer. The man had talked straight, friendly. He couldn't be involved in Sunday's murder, yet. . . .

A knock shook the door. Snowball entered. "De Rurales out behin' de bunkhouse, Marse Brett. *Teniente* Palos say he got impawtent news fo' yawl."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tap Roots Shot Away

STRANGELY excited, sensing that Palos had somehow come into possession of enlightening information, Brett hurried out to meet his friend, the officer who commanded a troop of mounted policemen. He found them standing by their horses, drawn smartly up at attention. Their leader, young, darkly handsome, graduate of Chapultepec, took Brett's hand. "My sympathy, *amigo*. I too lost my father to an assassin. I mourn with you."

"Thanks, *Teniente*. You have something to tell me?"

"*Si, señor*. Two things. First, by order of the *Comisionado* of Lands, I am here to investigate the sale of Rancho Carrizo to the Señor Freer. The Montoya family, in Zacatecas, has no knowledge of Don Pablo's intent to sell. They hear nothing from him. He neither paid off his men nor said goodbye to his amigos. The title is held up pending my report."

"Yes? What has that to do with me, *Teniente*?"

"Maybe little; maybe much. We have been watching Freer. When he and his men came here, today, we rode to Carrizo and put pressure on the man they left as guard. My *cabo,* Corporal Ruiz, being of Yaqui blood, knows how to make men talk. The fellow admitted that Don Pablo, stubbornly refusing to sell, had been slain. He also says that Freer came here to make off with a certain fund you American colonists build up to encourage revolutionary activities in the *Estados Unidos*."

"No."

"Yes. Which brings up an important point. This plot, you understand, violates our treaty with the United States. Our agents intercepted a letter from your father, Don Domingo, to some man in New Orleans. I have an order to arrest him, but *El Senor Dios* must judge him. Tomorrow, at ten, you will meet with me in Colonia Dedilla to tell me what you know of this matter."

Brett was deeply thoughtful. Neither he nor anyone, so far as he knew, had ever thought of allegiance to the Lost Cause as a violation of the terms of their fruitful colonization. All at once Brett saw these

prosperous farmers, stockmen and merchants torn up by the roots, stripped of their gains and banished across the Border into the vengeful hands of enemies still deeply resentful of treason. So, on behalf of his people and feeling like a Judas, he said:

"For Sunday Bynum, *Teniente,* the war was not lost on the battlefield, the Confederate Cause not hopelessly lost. He was a great leader and his people followed him even though they believed it a vain hope. We are all grateful for the kind of treatment of your government and your people. I think none of us ever thought of the tithing as a breach of faith. Sunday Bynum is dead. There is no one to succeed him. I will meet with you tomorrow. If you can find it in your heart to spare us the indictment, I will guarantee to disband the chapter, direct the fierce patriotism of these people to the great country that now mothers us all. More than that, I will hand you the victory fund which amounts to something over a hundred thousand dollars."

"Señor!" The officer drew himself up. "You would bribe me?"

"Not at all, *Teniente.* I hand you the fund as a gift from our people to your government—something with which to build a hospital, schools or any project to help the Mexican people. A gift of gratitude and appreciation."

Emotion shook the lieutenant. "You speak like a patriot, señor." His hand found Brett's. "On behalf of my country, I accept the sum. Whatever wrong has been done lies dead and buried in yonder grave. I shall report no evidence of a plot, nothing to indicate that your father's letter was not misinterpreted. Adios."

"*Adios, Teniente,* an' . . . thanks."

Brett turned away, moving back toward the house. Guests were beginning to depart. Horsemen broke from the racks, racing into the cottonwood lane. Wagon tires sang across graveled surfaces. A movement in the gloom of the blacksmith shop pulled Brett up short. He drew his gun. "Who's that? Come out!"

"Brett!"

"Aurie!" Brett's gun chocked into its leather and he crossed the interval in three long strides. She leaped to meet him, came to his arms and he was kissing her hungrily. "Aurie, darling. I've missed you so. I tried to find you, but—"

"I know, Brett." She broke from his embrace and in the starlight he saw that her face was terribly bruised, her eyes blackened. "But we must not talk about it now. You are in terrible danger. . . ."

"Freer, Aurie?"

"Not Freer, but Sackett—Omer Sackett! No, not what you're thinking; I don't believe he carries the old family hate; he hasn't room for it in his lust for money. He came here for the tithing fund, after joining your El Paso chapter and learning all about it. He killed Sunday Bynum and I saw it. You'll hate me and I hate myself that I didn't stop it. I could have, with my gun, but—but he's my uncle, Brett. He took me when my mother died, never abusing me till I interfered with his killing Bynum. He—he hit me with his gun. I ran away, got lost and . . . and wandered in the rain looking for. . . ."

She shivered, moaned, keeled over, having known neither food nor shelter since fleeing the Carrizo, Brett knew. He caught her up, strode toward the house, her faint warning in his ear. "Watch his men, Brett. He aims to . . . to rob you and he'll kill. He's a dead shot. Careful . . . my dear. Omer Sackett's gone all bad."

She fainted then and Brett took her in to a bed, calling to Carmencita to attend her. Snowball, missing nothing, joined him as he emerged from the bedroom. "Yawl send Misteh Freeah inter de office?"

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"Yes," Brett lied calmly, stepping past the darky toward the lighted threshold. "Have Baldy post the boys with guns. There's trouble."

"Yas, suh." Snowball slid like a great black cat into the night. Brett paused at the office door, filling his lungs. His pistol was sheathed and he smiled coldly as he shouldered inside.

Under the coal oil lamp, the room seemed gutted. Cupboard doors gaped open. Papers littered the floor. Freer, kneeling at an open drawer, rose, whirled, shot his hand to his pistol. Brett's hands hung down. Freer didn't draw.

"You're searching the wrong place, Omer."

The man's scar twitched. "Better for you if you'd stayed away, Bitt Bynum."

"I should kill you, Sackett, for killing Old Sunday. But knowing Mexican law, I'd rather turn you over for the murder of Pablo Montoya."

Sackett chuckled. "Look out the window, Bynum!"

Brett's glance shifted. The aperture framed a snarling, droopy-mustached face behind a leveled six-shooter. Stiff under the threat, Brett saw a swinging gun barrel thud against the gunman's skull. Then Snowball's grinning face was at the window.

Brett's shifting attention was Sackett's cue. His gun jerked from its sheath. Brett's draw was fast, but late. Even as he whipped his gun out, he braced against bullet shock. He heard the gunblast, felt surprise but no bullet sting, no agony. Only the tug at his sleeve as Sackett fired.

STAGGERED, Sackett cursed, spun and drove a slug at the window. Brett shot him. Sackett swayed, struggled for his balance and lost it, his coordination gone. He did work the gun but the bullets only plowed into the floor. He coughed, stumbled toward Brett, jaw sagging, blood drenching his chin. Brett shot him again as he fell forward and the lamp, jarred by recurring concussions, flickered out.

Outside, a fierce yell rocketed across the yard. Sodden smash of guns. Pound of boots. Bullets slashed through windows and doors, pocking the adobe walls. Women screamed. Men roared for them to stay down. Brett ducked, raced down the hallway replacing spent cartridges. Popping outside, he whirled about a rear corner. Sackett men charged the house. Others answered the challenges of Baldy and his cowpunchers. A team tore from the rack, overturning a wagon, racing away with splintering wreckage.

Brett shot at muzzle bursts, scored twice before they found him and rushed him, their bullets driving him around the corner, fighting back. Renegades were forcing the cowboys to retreat, despite Baldy's profane rallying. There were many more raiders than had followed Sackett to the grave. It began to look bad. Brett made for the rear door, determined to fight across the sills, as the Bynums had on the Blue, long ago. Then deliverance came, swiftly, unexpectedly.

Out of the gloom came Palos and his Rurales, spurring like demons, their saddle guns blazing. A short, sharp fight swirled about the house. Riff-raff from Juarez *cantinas* died there, a few escaping. Quiet fell. Palos was calmly tolling his troop.

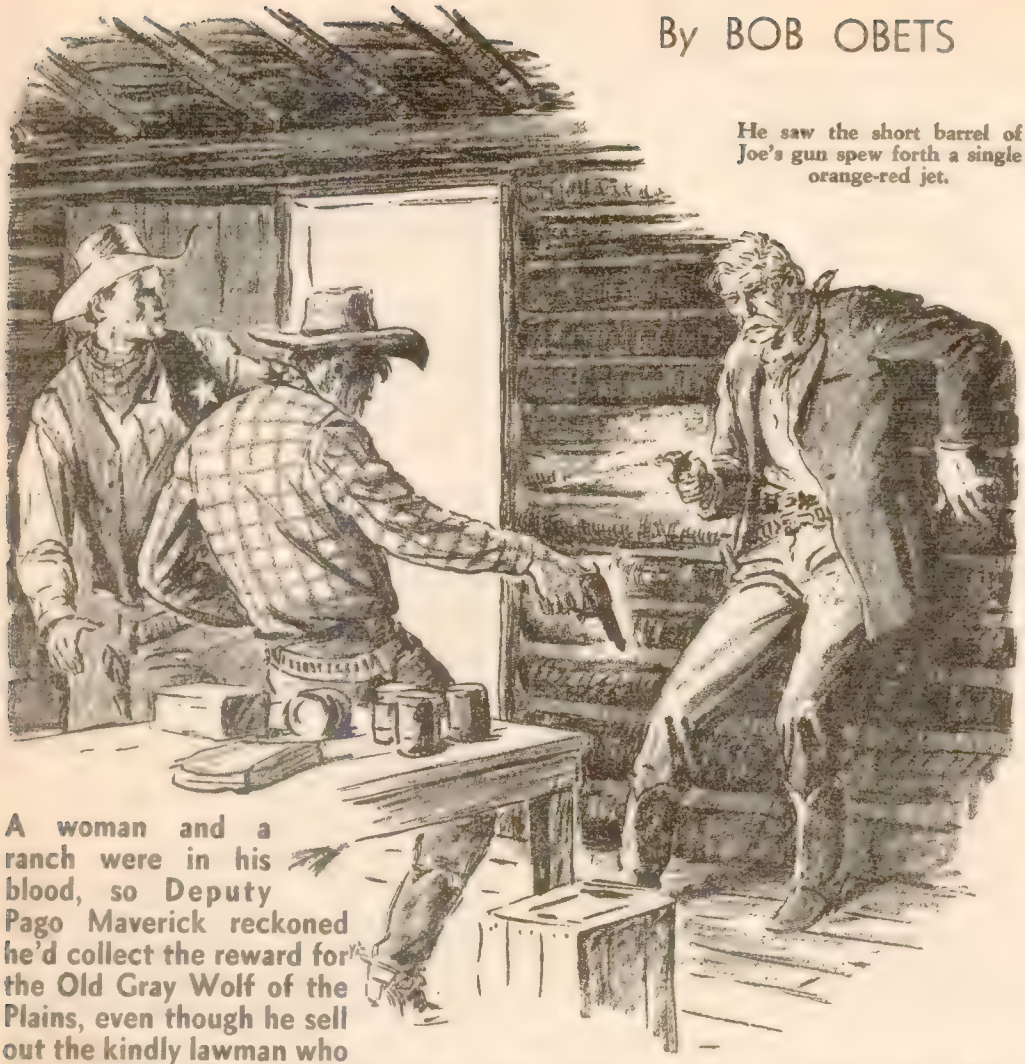
Through it all, Brett missed Snowball's booming voice. Cold fingers squeezed blood from his heart as he searched, recalling Sackett's desperate twist and swinging shot at the window. He found the darky sitting there against the wall, gun still gripped, Sackett's bullet between his eyes. His face was toward the stars, smiling faintly, as if death were requited in the finding of "Miss Milly, Jackson, Gord and de Marster."

Grieving a true and trusted friend, Brett looked toward the mound where Sunday rested. Tomorrow, the Old Man would not be so terribly alone. Straightening, Brett felt the damp night wind fan his cheeks and the song of it was in his ears, tempering the heaviness of his heart. Clean and strong, it carried the promise of many bright tomorrows. The feud had burned itself out. A tap root was cut and an ill-conceived plot would wither and die on the vine. Another sun would see an end to an onerous tithing and there would be room in men's minds and a full return for honest striving.

"I'm alone now," Brett thought, yet he was not alone at all. Sorrow was a bitter yeast inside him, but joy was there too and he could smile as he went to Aurie.

THE END

By BOB OBETS



He saw the short barrel of Joe's gun spew forth a single orange-red jet.

A woman and a ranch were in his blood, so Deputy Pago Maverick reckoned he'd collect the reward for the Old Gray Wolf of the Plains, even though he sell out the kindly lawman who had given Pago his name, his honest silver star—and his bounty-hunting life!

"Here's Nails in Your Coffin!"

YOUNG Pago Maverick smiled when he slammed the cell door shut, for the clanging sound was pleasant to his ear. It reminded him of the jingle of silver coins; it reminded him of a lot of nice things. The capture of Lefty Kane meant five hundred dollars more in bounty money. Enough bounty money added up to that little ranch he had in mind. A ranch could add up to Sally Mason's changing her name to Sally Maverick.

"Five hundred dollars, Lefty, my friend," he murmured to the man behind bars. "Five hundred, on the hoof. Just like money in the bank!"

"I could give it another name," Lefty Kane said. "All you'll get out of me is nails in your coffin."

Lefty Kane didn't need to bluster; he had killed three men. A posse had chased him half way across Texas, and he was here now, behind bars, only because Pago Mav-

erick had come up on him asleep in the brush. Kane aimed to catch up on his sleep. After that—well, this wouldn't be the first jail Lefty Kane had got out of. Pago Maverick, he figured, would make the fourth notch on his gun.

Pago Maverick, Sheriff Jesse Mason's deputy, was somewhat of a mystery around Bravo town. He was tight-lipped about his past, some folks said, because he didn't even like to think about it, much less talk about it. Sheriff Jesse, if he paid any attention to these remarks, heard them with an inward smile. For Sheriff Jesse, alone, knew that Maverick couldn't talk of his past. Beyond that afternoon, six years ago, when he had come out of his feverish wanderings to find Sheriff Jesse bending over him, Pago Maverick's mind was a blank. He couldn't even remember his real name. Sheriff Jesse had given him the name he now wore.

Pago Maverick would never forget that day. The Mexican woodcutter's shack. The rugged, square-jawed face of Sheriff Jesse. The pain of his feverish, raw wounds. Above all, the futile struggle to remember, and the helpless, lost feeling that washed over him when he couldn't remember.

Sheriff Jesse told him there had been a fight, but he refused to talk much about it. He questioned the kid, examined the wounds, and finally he shook his head.

"Well, if you ain't a maverick! No home that you know of, not even a name. Got to get you a name, then you're going home with me. Let's see, now."

The Mexican woodcutter, looking at the jagged wound across the kid's face, muttered, *"relámpago,"* which is the Spanish word for lightning.

"That's it!" Sheriff Mason exclaimed. "No home, nobody to claim him, and with that lightnin' brand on his face. Relámpago Maverick! Come along, Pago, you're going home with me."

So it was that the kid had got a home and a name, both. He had lived with the sheriff for six years. And during that time his friendship for the lawman's brown-eyed daughter, Sally, had grown into a feeling much warmer and deeper than the friendship of a boy for a kid of a girl. He loved Sally Mason. All his hopes and his dreams revolved around her shining, copper-brown head. Here lately, though, he couldn't understand Sally's attitude.

It was almost as if she were judging him. Almost as if she held her feelings poised, as on a teeter board, ready to tip either way, for or against him. Pago certainly couldn't understand Sally, these days. Why, he had ridden so many miles that the sight of a saddle made him sick! He had taken risks, gone without food, without sleep. He had pulled in every owlhooter who came into his county and some from adjoining counties, and he had saved his reward money. He had his ranch picked out, and now Sally didn't even seem interested in him or the ranch, either.

Pago shook his head. Wimmen!

LEFTY KANE was saying, "Look, Pago. I'm worth five hundred to you. Supposin' I could lead you to a man worth ten times that? A man worth five thousand, in reward money! Could we make a deal?"

Pago's head came up sharply from the reward poster he had been mechanically studying. He put the poster back in the drawer of his desk, with the others, and moved toward the cell door. His hazel eyes were bright with interest.

"Five thousand! Not but one ridge-runner in Texas carries that much bounty on his head. Old Joe Shiloh, the one Mexicans call The Gray Wolf. But . . ." Regretfully, he shook his hear. "Joe Shiloh hasn't been heard of since the Rangers jumped him, up in the Panhandle. They figured they wounded him. I guess, like any sick wolf, he hunted him a thicket and died in it. You're trying to run a whizzer on me, Lefty."

"I figured you'd be too dumb to cash in on a good thing," Lefty Kane said. "All you bounty-hunters are alike. Long on gun-play and short on brains! All right, Pago. Leave it go."

"What else can I do?" Pago demanded. "You expect me to just take your word?"

"Maybe," Lefty Kane said, "you expect *me* to carry a lock of the old Wolf's hair around in my pocket! A note sayin', 'I'm at the spot shown on this map. Come and get me!' Aw, the hell with you, Pago!"

He walked back and sat on the edge of the bunk. He began whistling the tune to a sad doggerel that went:

"Here lies the bones of Quickshot Buck,
his holster buckled, and his six-shooter
stuck. . . ."

Pago Maverick asked, "Anyway, how would we manage it, Lefty?"

Lefty Kane stopped whistling. He said, "Friend Quickshot was a bounty-hunter, too, Pago." He moved back to the cell door, chuckling at Pago's scowl.

"Here's the way I figured it. Soon as it comes dark, you take me out by the back way. I'm not armed; you can have your gun handy. I take you to Joe Shiloh, which ain't as far from here as you might think. You study them reward dodgers enough; you'll recognize him from his picture. Soon as you're sure he's your man, we say off widder-zane, like the Dutchmen do, and I hit for Old Mexico. Simple as that, Pago!"

"Not quite," said Pago. "First, I handcuff you. Then—maybe—I uncuff you."

"No deal!" declared Kane. "That old Gray Wolf might have lost some teeth, but he's still plenty dangerous. He'll likely down you, and I won't weep any bitter tears. I sure ain't leadin' you to him, wearin' handcuffs! That's that, Pago."

"All right. All right. What do I tell that Verdugo County sheriff I wired to come and get you? How do I explain—"

"That," said Lefty Kane, "is your worry. For five thousand dollars you ought to could explain a little thing like a jailbreak!"

"Five thousand dollars," said Pago dreamily. "That would just finish payin' out that little ranch."

A sound behind him caused Pago to turn. He saw Sally and Sheriff Jesse standing in the doorway.

THE thought came to Pago that Sheriff Jesse Mason looked old and tired. Early this morning, the sheriff had headed for the Espejo to serve some papers; but a little jaunt like that shouldn't make him look so beat out. Pago wondered how much of his and Lefty's conversation Sally and Sheriff Jesse had heard.

He said, "Lefty, here, was just tellin' me something right interestin', Sheriff Jesse."

"Interesting?" Sally said brightly. "Then he must have mentioned reward money!"

Her eyes, Pago thought, matched her tone. They, too, were bright, overly bright.

Sheriff Jesse didn't say anything. He stood with his big shoulders hunched forward a little, his puckered blue eyes unreadable. Pago wondered if a twinge of jealousy could be riding herd on him.

He said, "Sheriff from Verdugo wired that Lefty was headed this way. I was plain dog-lucky. He was beat out from missin' sleep, and I almost rode right over him. Wasn't anything to it."

"Just five hundred dollars," Sally said. "Just another tally in your bank account."

"Sally!" Sheriff Jesse said. Then, heavily: "Well, what about Joe Shiloh? You figure to go after him, Pago?"

So he had heard part of it! Pago said, cautiously, "Why, sure, if I can get a lead on him. Lefty won't say where he's hidin'."

"Maybe," Kane put in, "the sheriff, there, can tell you that. Seems I heard once that him and Joe Shiloh was buddies. Maybe that's why Shiloh picked this neck of the woods to bush up in."

Sheriff Jesse didn't seem to hear him. His blue eyes gave Pago a level stare. They stared at Pago for a long time. Then Sheriff Jesse said slowly, "Pago, I said something to you a long time ago. When I pinned that deputy badge on you, I told you to keep it shinin'. I meant those words then; I mean them now. Think it over, Pago. Keep that star shinin'."

He turned and went slogging out the door, leaving Pago to stare wonderingly at Sally Mason.

"Now, what," asked Pago, "did he mean by that?"

"He might have meant a number of things," Sally answered promptly. "He might have meant that a lawman has got no business making deals with a prisoner. He might have meant that there's a lot more to being a good deputy than gathering in all the reward money you can lay hands on."

"You know why I been after that money!" Pago blurted. "It's for you, Sally. For us. A man never could save up enough on a deputy's pay to own a ranch or anything else. My lord, do you think it's been easy? I've had it hard enough, without you turnin' on me! Doesn't that ranch I've been workin' for and runnin' risks for mean anything to you?"

"It could mean a lot," Sally said, watching him steadily. "Pago, I've thought—for years now—" Her voice went husky and stopped.

Pago asked, "What have you thought, Sally?"

"I won't tell you!" she cried. "And I'm

not any bounty that you can drag in with your gun!"

She went running, and Pago heard a little choked sound that might have been a stifled sob. He shook his head, much perplexed. Wimmen!

Lefty Kane murmured, "Kinda told you off, didn't she? Maybe that five thousand dollars would make her change her tune."

"Shut up, damn you!" Pago said savagely. He started out the door. Woods, the real estate man, had asked him to drop by the office. He headed for there now, simply because he wanted to be moving. He wasn't interested in talking to Woods about the ranch. The ranch and Sally Mason were tied up in his mind together. One without the other was like beefsteak without potatoes, like roast turkey without the dressing. A man could eat, but he wouldn't enjoy it.

Lefty Kane's sardonic drawl came after him: "You only got tonight, Pago. Five thousand, on the hoof! That's worth a heap more than that tin badge you're wearin', no matter how much you shine it!"

"Shut up, damn you!" Pago muttered.

SHERIFF JESSE was sitting in the sun on the jailhouse porch when Pago came back from the real estate office. On sudden impulse, Pago took the cane-bottomed chair beside him. He took out the makings, fashioned a cigarette and got it going. He pulled the smoke deep into his lungs, but for some reason it had no savor. He flipped the cigarette away.

"That little Mesquite Valley place, Woods tells me he's got another buyer for it. I've got till tomorrow to close the deal or let it go."

"Nice place," Sheriff Jesse said. "Good curly mesquite grass, not too brushy. Man could throw a dirt dam across Rustler Creek, and never need for water. Like to own that place, myself."

"I thought I did," Pago said glumly. "I thought I wanted that place enough to taste it. Now, well, I ain't so sure."

"Not much fun livin' alone," Sheriff Jesse agreed. "I tried it once, Pago. I had a ranch and I had a pardner . . . then I lost him."

Sheriff Jesse watched a dust-devil go dancing across the road, and after it had gone jigging on across the mesquite tops at the edge of town, he kept staring. Finally, as if to himself, he went on:

"I reckon men don't come any better. He did more than give his life for me. He gave up his wife and his kid. He turned outlaw, killed a man who was set to kill me, and the Kansas law called it murder. Texas drovers weren't much thought of, in Kansas, those days. I broke that pardner out of jail, Pago. That's all I could do, then. He ran out of Kansas, and he's been runnin' ever since."

"His name," Pago asked quietly, "could it be Joe Shiloh?"

Sheriff Jesse turned and gave him a steady look. He said, "His name is Joe Shiloh."

"What about his wife? What about the kid?"

"His wife died—ate her heart out, I guess. The kid, young Jesse, disappeared. That boy was named for me."

After a bit, Pago put another question. "Sayin' he's in this county, Sheriff Jesse—you going to ask me not to go after him? I guess I'd do anything you wanted me to."

Sheriff Jesse said, "No, Pago. Joe Shiloh's life is over with. For over a year now, he's packed a lung wound the Rangers give him. He hasn't got many days to live, and he doesn't much care how he lives them. A man could collect five thousand dollars by bringin' him in, and Joe Shiloh wouldn't argue with him. There's only one thing Joe cares about, now. That's what brought him to this county."

"Would you—is it anything you could talk about?"

"Later, maybe," Sheriff Jesse said. "Not now. I've got to think this thing out."

"But that five thousand dollars," Pago said. "And that business of keepin' your star shining. I can savvy why you wouldn't want to go after Joe Shiloh. But after all, Joe Shiloh is a killer. It's not right to let him go free. I'm thinkin', Sheriff Jesse, that I better go bring him in."

"Pago, in this case," Sheriff Jesse said slowly, "the right and wrong of it don't bother me. Maybe it's not right to let Joe Shiloh go free. But in the first place, the law made a mistake in brandin' Joe Shiloh a murderer. Since then, he's had to kill in self-defense. He's killed a couple of rotten bounty-hunters that I know of. The rest of the killings charged against him are false.

Joe Shiloh has got gun-magic in his hands. He's winged several men he could easy have killed. I don't believe you nor any other man—includin' Verdugo McVey—could bring Joe Shiloh in without some way trappin' him."

"I'd like to try," Pago said. "I'm not so slow with a gun."

"Neither is Verdugo McVey," Sheriff Jesse said. "Some men are born with a gift for handlin' a gun. You and McVey, for example. And Joe Shiloh's got you both shaded." He got up from the chair. "See you later, Pago."

VERDUGO McVEY, though in his early thirties, was building himself quite a rep along the lower reaches of the Rio Grande. There were a few men who argued that Verdugo McVey was a better bloodhound than Pago Maverick. To support that argument, they pointed out that, when lawmen from four counties were hot after the brothers Carradine for murdering the old crossroads storekeeper, it was Verdugo McVey who had brought them in, tied across their saddles, dead.

For that job, the Verdugo County sheriff had pocketed a neat piece of change, and there were men mean enough to claim that Pago Maverick had gone green with envy. Other men were quick to retort that at least Pago brought in a few *live* prisoners. And the ones he brought in dead, they claimed, usually had been shot from the front instead of the back. Just wait, they said, till a real outlaw hit the country!

So, considering these arguments, it was not surprising that the arrival of Verdugo McVey with a couple of hard-eyed deputies caused a bit of a stir in Bravo town. The three lawmen and their horses arrived in a box car, hitched onto the southbound express. A crowd gathered, almost before the box car had been switched onto the siding. Something big must be in the wind! Verdugo McVey wouldn't bring two deputies, simply to take Lefty Kane back to Verdugo City. Where was Sheriff Jesse? Where was Pago Maverick?

Verdugo McVey asked those two questions, then he answered one. "It's Joe Shiloh," he said grimly. "We got word that Joe Shiloh's hidin' out, not ten miles from town."

Pago Maverick was sitting on the front

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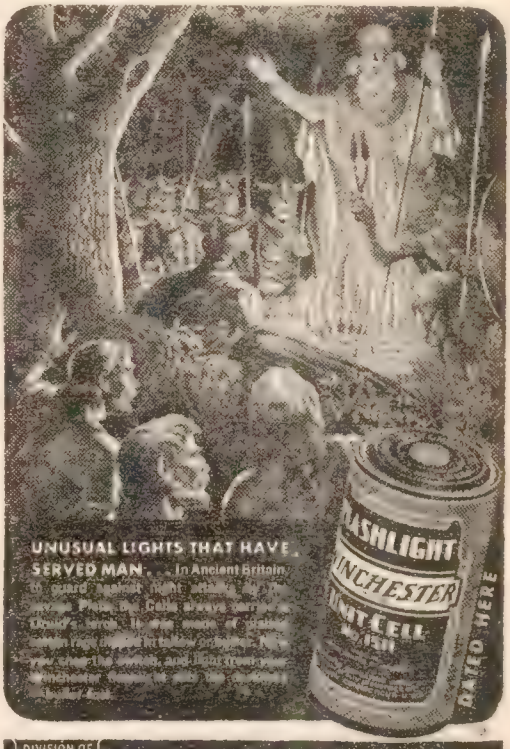

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steps of Sheriff Jesse's house, when the three lawmen rode up. Pago was whittling on a soft pine stick, frowning a little, trying to get a number of things straightened out in his mind. He heard the door open, heard Sally's footsteps behind him. He didn't look around.

He said, "Sally, I guess I'll let that ranch go. I guess you've made your feelins right plain. Maybe you're right, Sally. Maybe I am a bounty-hunter. If Sheriff Jesse hadn't taken me in, I might have turned out a bank robber or a killer. I don't know. I've got no idea what sort of blood runs in my veins. If Sheriff Jesse knows, he won't tell me. So maybe it's bad. I guess you'd be takin' a mighty long chance, to hook up with a fellow like me."

"It's not who your people were," Sally said. "Pago, it's the kind of man you are that counts."

"I don't even know that," Pago said glumly. "Until here lately, I figured I was about as good as most. But now, well, all I can think about is you and that ranch and the five thousand dollars I could get for Joe Shiloh. A chance like that, Sally, might never come again. If I don't go after Joe Shiloh, somebody else will."

"Somebody like Verdugo McVey?" Sally said questioningly. "If you want to pattern yourself after him, yonder he comes now."

Pago swung his body around and saw McVey and his two deputies ride up to the yard gate. He got up and moved toward them, conscious of McVey's sardonic smile.

"It's been quite a spell, Pago," McVey said. "Haven't seen you since the day I brought in the Carradines. So you caught Lefty Kane for me."

He lifted his hat to Sally as she stopped beside Pago, showing her the black shine of his eyes. "Where's Sheriff Jesse?"

Before Pago could answer, Sally said, "He rode off. He probably won't be back till dark. Is there anything I could tell him?"

"Not a thing, Miss Sally, not a thing!" McVey declared. He added, "Though I am right curious to know where and how Pago, here, captured Kane."

"I rode up on him asleep in the brush, near Wild Horse Creek," Pago told him. "Why?"

"Just to confirm what I was told," said McVey. "I captured a pardner of Lefty's. Him and Lefty and another gent split up when things got too hot. They made a rendezvous, but I guess, last night in the dark, Lefty couldn't find it. I bet that third party found it, though! With yo' permission, Pago, me and the boys will ride out and take a look. You keep Lefty Kane on ice for us."

"Hold on!" Pago growled as the three men reined around. "You got no authority in this county, McVey!"

"A mere technicality, Pago," McVey replied, chuckling. "My idea is, wherever you find a snake, stomp him! Be seein' you, my friend."

"Joe Shiloh!" Sally gasped. "Pago, that third man was Joe Shiloh. You've got to stop them!"

Pago gave her a sharp look. He took her shoulders in his strong hands, and he said, "So that's where Sheriff Jesse went!"

"Yes," she said hurriedly, "he went to take food to Joe Shiloh and to talk to him. You don't understand, Pago! Dad's under oblgiation to Joe Shiloh. He said his debt to Joe Shiloh means more to him than anything in the world. He won't let McVey take Shiloh. Pago, you've got to stop McVey!"

"I can't stop him," Pago said. "But maybe I can get there ahead of him. That depends on Lefty Kane."

He went running around the house to the small corral. As he ran, he cursed Verdugo McVey.

THEY rode through the mesquite, Pago Maverick, the lawman, and Lefty Kane, the outlaw, not talking much, each thinking his own thoughts. Though once the outlaw asked, "How come you to change your mind, Pago? How come you to take me up on the proposition?"

"Isn't five thousand dollars enough reason?" Pago countered, saying nothing about Verdugo McVey and his two deputies, nothing about Sheriff Jesse Mason. Yet the thought of Sheriff Jesse kept worrying around in Pago's mind.

He could understand how Sheriff Jesse felt about Joe Shiloh. He could understand, because now that he thought about it, he felt the same way about Sheriff Jesse. Sheriff Jesse had taken him in, had given him a home and a job. Sheriff Jesse had

given him everything he owned that was worth having. He guessed he would go pretty far to help Sheriff Jesse, and unless he was mistaken, Sheriff Jesse might need some help right soon.

For a man like Verdugo McVey to find Sheriff Jesse talking with Joe Shiloh would be bad enough. Besides, there was no telling how far Sheriff Jesse would go. Sheriff Jesse was a man who believed in paying his debts and sticking by his friends. There was no telling how bad the thing might turn out or who might be hurt.

"Damn the bounty-huntin' son," Pago muttered.

"Come again," said Lefty Kane. "You, of all people, damning an honest bounty-hunter! Sort of like the pot callin' names at the kettle, Pago."

"Shut up!" Pago said.

They went splashing across Cow Creek, with Pago's head turning in a constant alertness. Every time the brush moved, his nerves crawled with dread. His eyes searched each mesquite-choked draw they crossed, for from any one of them might ride the stocky figure of Verdugo McVey.

In the edge of a weed-grown clearing, Lefty Kane pulled up. He pushed his chin in the direction of the miserable shack that stood in the clearing, and he said, "That's it, friend Pago. This is where we say off widder-zane. I think that means 'I'll be seein' you again.' Well—"

"Hold on," Pago said. "I got to make sure you've brought me to the right—"

He stopped, his eyes watching a gray-haired man, in a black coat, bareheaded, who had come past the back corner of the shack. The man carried a bucket, and without looking around, he headed toward the creek.

"Satisfied, Pago?" Lefty Kane grunted.

"Get going," said Pago. "Get going and keep going till you cross the county line."

He got down and tied his horse. With never another look at Lefty Kane, he started across the clearing toward the mud-and-log shack. It wouldn't take Joe Shiloh long to fetch that bucket of water. He intended to be waiting when the outlaw came in the door. He was feeling a little better. No sign of Sheriff Jesse. He guessed Sheriff Jesse, if he had been here at all, had headed back for town.

Pago stopped inside the doorway and took a quick survey of the place. Opposite him was the door Joe Shiloh had gone out of. To his left, a mesquite-pole wall chinked with mud divided the shack into two rooms. In this room there was a mud-and-stone fireplace, an up-ended pine box that might serve for a stool, and a rough board table that swayed like a drunk person when Pago touched it. On the table were several cans of tomatoes, a slab of bacon, a box of crackers, groceries that Sheriff Jesse might have brought from town. Sheriff Jesse didn't seem to be around, but Verdugo McVey and his bully boys would be, and that right soon! Now that he was here, Pago didn't see much reason why he should let McVey walk off with that five thousand dollars. Footsteps outside, now. That would be Shiloh fetching his bucket of water.

Pago crossed the room and stood close against the wall, his gun in his hand. When Joe Shiloh came through the doorway, Pago simply shoved the gun against his ribs, and that's all there was to it. He reached with his free hand and lifted the outlaw's weapon. He stuck the weapon inside his waistband, stepped back grinning.

"Well, Joe, looks like your fun is over. How about takin' a little ride with me?"

JOE SHILOH was somewhat of a disappointment to Pago. His face was lined and lean and gray, but the expression on that face seemed sad rather than vicious. And the eyes of Joe Shiloh, watching Pago, were mild and brown. Slowly he lowered the bucket of water to the floor. His voice, when he spoke, held nothing of anger or of bitterness.

"Jesse warned me you might come. I told him you wouldn't. Son, you can put that gun away. I wouldn't harm you, if I could."

"Why didn't you think I'd come after you?" Pago asked, holding the gun steady.

"That," said Joe Shiloh with a touch of sadness, "is a long story, son. Jesse told you why I turned outlaw. I hoped—I figured, a fine, upstandin' feller like he made you out to be— Son, is it account of the reward money?"

Something about this gray old man kept nagging at Pago's memory. Well, he guessed it was because of the descriptions and the pictures on reward posters. Joe

Shiloh was a killer, and like Verdugo McVey said, a man ought to stomp a snake wherever he found one.

Pago said almost savagely, "You might be Sheriff Jesse's friend, but you mean nothing to me! You're a wanted man, and it's my sworn duty to bring you in."

"Of course it is, son," Joe Shiloh agreed. "And I can see how five thousand dollars might make a man remember his duty. But . . ." He sighed. Then a cruel fit of coughing shook him, so that he leaned heavily against the wall.

With that racking sound in his ears, Pago failed to hear the sound behind him. He said, "The money had nothing to do with it! I came here to warn Sheriff Jesse. Verdugo McVey and two deputies are fixin' to round up this place. I came—"

"So that," said the mocking voice of Lefty Kane, "is how come you changed your mind! You made a deal with me to bring you here, knowin' that McVey and his bloodhounds might be waitin'. Pago, my friend, you've made your last deal. You've tallied up your last bloody dollar. Turn loose of that gun, Pago. Drop it!"

Pago had no choice. He let his gun drop. The gun muzzle at his back ceased its pressure, and Lefty Kane stepped around, his thin, dark face a vicious thing to see. His boot toe sent the six-shooter Pago had dropped skittering across the dirt floor. The gun in his hand held its steady line, pointing at a spot just above Pago's shell belt.

"You should have looked my saddle over closer, Pago. That hidden holster built into my saddlebags cost me fifty bucks. Now's when I get my money's worth."

The eyes of Lefty Kane were wide and staring. He slid his tongue along his lips, and his thumb pulled back the gun hammer.

"So you planned all along to doublecross me," Pago said, and he was measuring his chances and finding them mighty slim. "I might have known that a man who would sell out his own kind—like you did Joe Shiloh—wouldn't play straight."

"I didn't figure for Joe to suffer," said Lefty Kane. "You damned bounty-hunter! Like you said, I figured to kill you, all along."

The voice of Joe Shiloh spoke with gentleness. "You made a deal with him, Lefty. If you would doublecross Pago, you would doublecross me. Don't drop that hammer, Lefty. The moment you do, you're dead."

Lefty Kane said, "Joe!" and he pulled his gun half around.

Joe Shiloh went on as if Lefty Kane were not present, "Pago, there's one thing I want you to know. Sheriff Jesse told you what made me turn outlaw. He hoped that the tellin' of it would make you see things a bit different. He hoped it would make you forget the five thousand dollars on my head. Well, I'm fixin' to make a play, Pago, that will probably be my last one. I guess, if it does sound silly to say it, I'm going to save your life. Then, if you want to, Pago, you can collect that five thousand."

Lefty Kane snarled, "You talk like a story book! You talk like a fool, Joe! Now, I've got to kill both of you!"

"Start killin', Lefty," Shiloh said.

JOE SHILOH was beat before he started. Lefty Kane's gun was out and ready, and all he had to do was swing it and let the hammer drop.

In that flash of time, while Kane was swinging his gun into line, Pago Maverick thought of a lot of things. He remembered Sheriff Jesse's words, ". . . I don't believe you nor any other man—includin' Verdugo McVey—could bring Joe Shiloh in. . . ." He watched the hand of Joe Shiloh strike beneath his black coat. He watched that hand reappear, holding a short-barreled shoulder gun, and he knew that Sheriff Jesse's words were true. Joe Shiloh, the man he had called a killer, could have killed him. Joe Shiloh hadn't wanted to kill him, hadn't intended to make a play for his hidden shoulder gun! Pago Maverick didn't know why this was, but he was certain that the killer instinct was not in old Joe Shiloh.

Pago saw Lefty Kane's gun flame; saw Joe Shiloh stagger back as the lead drove into him. He saw Shiloh settle his shoulders flat against the wall, to brace himself; saw the short barrel of Joe's gun spew forth a single orange-red jet. Then Lefty Kane was down. Kane was dead. And Joe Shiloh, still holding his gun, was staring at Pago.

"I haven't got a gun," Pago said. "I'm a lawman and you're an outlaw. Go ahead and shoot me, Joe."

"I wouldn't ever hurt you, son," Joe Shiloh said. "I—once I had a kid. If that kid had grown up to be a lawman, proud of

his badge and honest and fine—like Sheriff Jesse—I guess I'd be the happiest man on earth. But a lawman who thinks only of bounty money, who doesn't give a whoop whether the men he brings in are good or bad—well, he's a pretty sorry kind, son. Well, you better hurry, or I won't be in shape for that ride you was talkin' about."

Shiloh's shoulders started sliding down the wall. He flung out both hands, bracing himself against the wood.

A strange, choky feeling came over Pago Maverick. A hurting came in his throat.

He said, "You could have settled with Lefty Kane, any time. You saved my life, Joe. You, the man I looked on as just so much money walkin' around."

Neither of them noticed Sheriff Jesse, until he spoke. He had come from the other room and was standing there, staring.

He said, "Joe, I couldn't help you in this. I heard the kid coming while you were down at the creek. I peeked through one of them chinks, then I hid in the other room. When Lefty Kane put his hand in, I couldn't shoot, because the kid was in the way. Joe, are you hit bad? How do you feel, Joe?"

"I feel fine!" said Joe Shiloh. "I never felt better in my life!"

He was sliding down the wall, falling. But the warmth of his words seemed to linger.

Sheriff Jesse went to kneel on one side of him, Pago on the other. Shiloh, his brown eyes peculiarly bright, looked up at both of them. So low that Pago could hardly catch the words, he said, "That kid I named for you, Jesse. I want you to know one thing. Jesse, that kid turned out all right." His eyes closed and he seemed to be asleep.

Sheriff Jesse, looking down at his old friend, spoke gruffly. "Six years ago, Joe, you came into this country. You didn't know I was sheriff here, and I didn't know you were anywheres around. I rode up on you, in the brush, killed your pardner and come near to killin' you and young Jesse. That kid wouldn't be ashamed of you, Joe. Not now. But I reckon it's better, this way. We won't tell him, Joe."

"Won't tell who?" Pago asked.

"We won't tell Joe's kid," Sheriff Jesse said. "Joe's got a fine kid, one of the best. They tell me, he's fixing to get married. They tell me he's got a law job, up in the Panhandle. He's a real lawman, Pago. Keeps his star shinin'."

VERDUGO McVEY came in one door, and his two deputies came in the other. Each of them had a gun in his hand. McVey saw Joe Shiloh, on the floor, and his face turned dark as a thundercloud.

"Look here, Pago! I tipped you off to this. You didn't know Joe Shiloh was anywhere in the country till I told you Lefty Kane had a pardner. You went runnin' to Lefty. You made a deal with him—double-crossed him, from the looks of him, there—and he brought you here before I could find the place. Feller, it won't stick! I aim to have my share of that reward money! Take Shiloh out of here, boys. We're headin' back to town."

"Not with Joe Shiloh," Pago said. He stood up, with Joe Shiloh's short-barreled pistol in his hand. "You won't even touch Joe, or God help me, I'll plug you!"

"And I'll be right in on the pluggin'!" Sheriff Jesse said. "McVey, you're out of bounds in my county. Take my advice. Take your two blood-suckers away!"

McVey scowled. He muttered an oath, turned himself about, and growled, "Come on, boys."

Sheriff Jesse looked at Pago, and Pago looked back at him.

"Bounty-hunters," said Pago.

"Blood-suckers!" snorted Sheriff Jesse.

Hoofbeats stopped outside, and Sally came running in the door. She pulled up short. She looked at Sheriff Jesse. Then she looked at Pago.

She said, "I thought—if either of you—Dad are you all right? Pago, are you hurt?"

"He's all right," Sheriff Jesse said. "I guess he never was more all right."

"One thing, though," Pago said. "I guess we'll have to wait a while for that ranch, Sally. I guess bounty money—"

"Bounty money!" Sally exclaimed.

"You mean," Pago asked, "you mean you don't mind waiting?"

"You—you idiot!" Sally cried. She looked as if she wanted to stamp her foot.

Then Pago took a step toward her, a quick, eager step. And Sheriff Jesse said with deep satisfaction, "It looks like you've found a real man, Sally. It looks like that kid turned out all right."

PRINT IT IN HOT LEAD!

By THOMAS THOMPSON

DAN BOLTON put down the eighth grade English book he was studying and tucked it away under the bolt of calico dress goods on the lower shelf. He ran his finger around under his high collar, tugged once at the broad tie that was knotted in just the way Jenny had taught him, and let his hand go automatically to his hip. He grinned sheepishly. Of course it wasn't there, it hadn't been for over two years. But in some ways a man doesn't change much. Dan Bolton could still tell when trouble was in the air.

He walked out behind the counter to where he could see the street. It was a habit he hadn't outgrown, this quick glancing around, and his keen blue eyes took in the center of town without missing anything. Clay Chatsworth, his crippled right arm stiff beside him, was just unlocking the *Clarion* office, and the set of the newspaper man's shoulders told Dan that Clay was satisfied with the editorial he had dreamed up during the night. That meant that Dooley Spence would be satisfied, too. But the thing that held Dan's eyes was the big spotted gelding in front of the Silver Slipper. Strangers had a way of worrying Dan Bolton.

Two women came into the store. One of them, broad and wide-faced, smiled and twittered coyly when Dan came to wait on her. She prattled on about how her husband Si needed new overalls—he wore holes in the bibs from carrying that big watch of his and leaning on a shovel, she said, and Dan laughed dutifully. The other woman, more serious, said, "I'll be taking my buckboard to bring the crowd from the upper valley into the polls, Sena-

"Not Senator yet, Mrs. Smith."

"You will be," Mrs. Smith said, sniffing loudly. "It's gettin' so decent people don't read the *Clarion* anyway, so don't let that bother you." The broad-faced woman winced at that. She apparently still read the valley's only newspaper, and Dan didn't wonder. Clay Chatsworth was smart enough to mix a little local gossip in with his propaganda for Senator Dooley Spence.

Dan made small talk about the crops and inquired of Mrs. Smith as to how their dairy was making out. The tenseness of his hands when he tied the packages was not apparent to the two women. Dan had learned to conceal his emotions in much the same way he had learned to see what was going on about him without betraying the fact. If he saw Ash Milligan lounging out there near the door now, he didn't let on, but when the women left and Ash sauntered in Dan was waiting for him. Ash busied himself looking at lanterns. Over his shoulder he said, "Stranger in town, Danny."

When Dan Bolton strapped on that six-iron to side the farmers against two-bit politicians and coffin-making cattlemen, he made a solemn vow to the living—and broke his sacred word to the dead!

"I saw that," Dan said, putting down some figures in a book. "Anybody we know, Ash?"

"Tall. Black hair. Fancy vest. Carries his gun high and leaves his coat loose." Ash set down a new lantern and came over to rest gnarled hands on the counter. He was thin as a rod and he had a seamed face and ageless eyes. His hair was white, as was his full mustache. There was a quick way about him. He said, "He asked about you, Dan."

Dan Bolton smiled, but there was not much humor in his eyes. "That sign out there is big enough to see," he said. "Jenny said she wanted the name known."

"Might be bad, Dan," old Ash said.

"Let me know if anything turns up, will

There was another blast—another shock—and Dan Bolton fired.

you?" Dan said, his eyes blinking rapidly.

"Sure, kid."

Kid. Dan Bolton thought about that a lot after Ash left. The old man hadn't called him that for a long time now. He wondered if it were a reminder, or was it just that this was more like old times, this lounging around a saloon, getting a line on a stranger. They had been good at that once, Ash Milligan and Dan Bolton, and in those days Ash had always called him Kid. His eyes caught the bolt of dress goods and he frowned. *The Calico Kid.*

LATER that afternoon he saw the cowboys coming in from the outlying ranches. They headed for the Silver Slipper, and in a little while Dooley Spence's DS bunch thundered in, their yells ripping the air and sending kids and dogs scattering for cover. One man stood up in his stirrups and tore down a "Bolton for State Senator" banner that hung in front of Dan's store.

Someone came out of the saloon and handed the rider a bottle of whiskey. He drank deeply, then continued riding up and down the street, dragging the sign. Dan watched, and he kept cracking the knuckles of first one hand and then the other. Jenny had told him he would have to hold

his temper, and Jenny knew. She had learned a lot from her dad in his long climb from sheriff to congressman.

It was when they were piling up the broken boxes and barrels for the big bonfire that Dan first saw the stranger. He came out of the saloon, flanked by two DS men, and he came straight across to the store. Ash Milligan had described him well, and Dan's eyes went to the worn holster that tilted at an angle and made a bulge under the well-fitting coat.

The three men entered the store and one of them knocked a pile of gloves from the table near the door. Dan picked them up one by one and piled them back on the table. The two punchers stood there, weaving, as the stranger watched. When the gloves were piled neatly the stranger knocked them off again and the punchers roared with laughter, slapping their legs as they doubled over. Dan took two steps forward, his fists knotted. He could feel the perspiration on his forehead. "Was that an accident?" he asked softly.

"No," the stranger said. He moved, and his coat opened more.

Dan stood there, the blood pounding in his temples. There had been a day when he would have matched guns with the man and stepped over his dead body without batting an eye, but that was before he met Jenny. He thought it all out before he married her, and he knew that someday this moment would come. He had figured then it would be worth it, and his opinion hadn't changed. He stepped back and said, "I'm not looking for trouble."

"Then stay the hell out of town tonight," the stranger said. "This is a Dooley Spence rally and we don't want you around!"

"Guess I can't oblige you there," Dan said slowly. His mind had flicked to Clay Chatsworth and his *Clarion*. It would be all the editor with the bullet-shattered right arm would need now—Dan's refusing to show up. For the past three weeks the *Clarion* had been full of the coming open debate between Dooley Spence and Dan Bolton. Dan had held his peace, but he promised that tonight he would bring the whole railroad question out in the open and prove where the Spence plan would make a ghost town out of Wenton and make cattle range out of the rich farms. The stranger had pulled back his coat, and his thumb was hooked loosely in his gun-belt. "You stay out of town," he said softly.

ASH MILLIGAN was waiting when Dan closed the store. The town was crowded with cowmen and farmers alike now, all drawn to the coming debate between young Dan Bolton and State Senator Dooley Spence. Dan saw the punchers turn over an empty wagon that was standing in front of the hardware store. There was a Bolton banner tacked to the side of the wagon. Two farmers came running out of the store and there was a quick flurry of fists and much loud talk. The punchers weaved their way back to the Silver Slipper and farmers righted the wagon.

Ash Milligan cursed softly. "It was easier in the old days," he said, touching the gun on his hip.

"I promised Jenny," Dan Bolton said, and together the men walked up the street toward the little white cottage that sat behind the low picket fence.

Inside the gate, near the north side of the house, there was a bed of violets, and Dan stopped to pick a bunch. Ash Milligan turned his head and he kept clearing his throat. When Dan had finished picking the flowers he held out the bunch for Ash to see. "Her favorites," he said simply. They went into the house.

A woman's touch was everywhere about the place. The full lace curtains at the windows, the antimacassars on the arms of the chairs and on the back of the settee. Dan stood there, just as he did every night, and he took in every detail of it silently, almost reverently. Ash Milligan waited. Then, as at the end of a church ceremony, he bustled to life too suddenly and came back to the business at hand. He said, "You met the stranger?"

Dan nodded. "Never saw him before."

"But we've seeen a hundred like him," Ash reminded. "A paid trouble-maker."

"He warned me to stay out of town."

"What you aim to do about it?"

Dan went to the closet off the bedroom. He was gone a long time, and when he came back he had a gun-belt buckled around his middle. Ash said, "I'm glad, Kid."

"Jenny wouldn't like it," Dan said. He was standing in front of the fireplace, his back to Ash Milligan. "She had her heart set on me being Senator."

"You've done a lot, Dan. The store and all that book learnin' you been workin' on! Takes a big man to change the way you've changed, Dan."

They knew each other well enough that Ash could speak this way, for they had shared short rations, smokeless fires and gunsmoke together. Without one there would have been no life in the other, and though they did not speak of such things they were aware of them when they were together.

Dan said, "Something to eat?"

Ash shook his head. "Empty stomach, remember?"

Yes, Dan remembered. That had been the way with Ash Milligan and the Calico Kid in those wild days when they hired their guns to fight the land-grabbing, crop-trampling cattlemen and branded themselves killers in the eyes of a cattle-controlled law.

"Grub tastes better after a man's work is through," the Kid had always said.

Suddenly Dan's hand went to his holster and he spun around and faced Ash, gun in his hand. The draw had been pitifully slow, and the look on Milligan's face would have told him so, even if the old man's words hadn't. "Stay out of trouble, Kid," Ash said softly. Dan nodded as he slowly dropped the gun back in its holster.

"I want that more than anything else," Dan said. "I want to stay out of trouble."

They went outside then, and at the little gate they both stopped, a tenseness coming over them. Dan dropped the latch quietly into place and turned to wait for Clay Chatsworth, coming up the street toward them. The editor had a telegram in his hand, and his stiff right arm stuck out in front of him and jerked up and down as he hastened along.

DAN took a deep breath and appraised the editor carefully. He wore his big hat and his high heel boots, and around his middle was a gun-belt with the cedar butt of a .44 protruding from the holster. This garb was as much a part of him as his bullet-shattered arm. It was his link with the past, when he had been as good a cowman as the best of them, and he clung to it with the same tenacity that marked his fight to develop the *Clarion*. The gun, the boots and the hat men accepted, out of place as they were, and no one ever questioned why a man who could not bend his arm should carry a gun. The editor's eyes were alive with excitement, and he gave no greeting as he waved the telegram in front of Ash and Dan.

"I felt it my public duty to find out all I could about the candidates," he said, the excitement pitching his voice high. "I got word from some folks in Oklahoma who know you, Bolton." Dan saw the quick hard light that came into Ash Milligan's eyes, and he felt a sudden chill between his shoulderblades. Dan Bolton was not too well known in the country that had once been the Cherokee Strip, but the Calico Kid was a name well remembered.

"Hope you found what you wanted," Dan said dully.

"Don't know whether I'll even use it or not," the editor said meaningly. "Depends a lot on your speech tonight. I aim to back my candidate to the limit. You know that."

"I wouldn't expect you to draw any lines," Dan said.

The editor's attitude changed. He said, "It's not personal, Dan, I want you to know that. If you should win and your platform proves good, I'll string along."

"If Dooley Spence will let you," Dan said.

The editor's face drained of color and his speech dropped into the vernacular. "That ain't so, Dan," he said flatly. "Nobody tells me how to run my paper. I believe cows is the best thing for the country, and I aim to keep believin' that way, but nobody tells me what to say. I didn't get this stiff arm playin' favorites, Dan."

It was the truth, and Dan knew it. Rabid as Chatsworth was in his opposition, he was that way because he believed he was right. The memory of the four Grout brothers was too fresh in everyone's mind to question Chatsworth's courage. How he had faced the four killers single handed and accounted for three was a matter of record, and Clay Chatsworth, wearing his shattered arm as a result, was the first one to not let people forget. What happened to the fourth Grout brother called

Pinto, no one knew, but some whispered that the existence of this avenger with a leaning toward spotted horses was the reason Clay Chatsworth still wore a gun.

"You've never printed any truth about me," Bolton reminded.

The editor's eyes were angry. He said, "Maybe I will yet, Bolton. How's your business down at the store. You sellin' lots of *calico*?"

ASH MILLIGAN was silent as the two men went on down-town. The weight of Dan Bolton's thoughts was apparent in the sag of his shoulders and the heaviness of his step. Everything that he had fought for was crashing around him now, and the fear that he had never shared with Jenny was becoming a reality.

She had expected so much of him, and he had worked hard to fulfill those expectations. She came from an old family whose very name was already making a mark in the pages of the new history books, and with her, tradition was a live thing.

He knew that when he married her, and he accepted it and all the responsibility it entailed. The store had grown, and he had worked until midnight on the school books she had picked out for him. Together they won the hearts of the farmers, and it was at her insistence that he promised to run for Senator. It was a far cry from the wild days of the Calico Kid, but it was the way of a man like Dan Bolton when he loved a wife like Jenny. Now his past had caught up with him, and it was crashing—crashing. . . .

He went straight to the Silver Slipper, an instinct older than Jenny's training telling him to strike at the heart of trouble.

Outside the glow of the big bonfire laced red tongues of light across the false-fronted buildings, but inside the saloon there was only the roar of voices and the blue white dimness of smoke fogged air. The stranger stood with his back to the bar, his left boot heel hooked over the brass rail. The gun on his hip was in plain view. A half dozen DS men pressed around him, their eyes glued to the half sneering droop of his scarcely moving lips, their ears tuned to the tales he told. The change in his expression when he saw Dan Bolton brought a sudden hush to his section of the bar. He pushed the men aside as he took two steps out into the big room.

"I told you to stay out of town, Bolton," he said.

Dan Bolton kept walking straight forward, Ash Milligan keeping a few feet behind him. He said, "I told you I couldn't oblige you."

The stranger glanced at the gun on Dan's hip, then sneered. In that quick appraisal he made one of those mistakes a man too sure of himself sometimes makes. With the eager eyes of the DS men on him, the stranger reached out and slapped Bolton across the face.

Like a spring that has been under tension too long, Dan's fist swept up. The sharp crack was loud in the now still room, and the stranger went back in a broken run and crashed against the bar. Blood was seeping from his mouth and nostrils when he slid down to the floor. The DS men stared in silence, then together they made a mad charge toward the man who had shattered their idol.

Dan and Ash met them head on. It was an unorganized fight, with not much heart in it. Three of the punchers were so drunk that they spent most of their time weaving around, shoving each other and swinging wildly at the vacant air. The three that were doing the fighting were not much to handle, and Dan and Ash, alive with the old fire that had been so long banked within them slashed murderous blows that drew a toll. There was much tearing of clothes and Dan felt blood splatter his half naked chest. Then the doors swung wide, and a man ran in.

"The Senator is talking," he yelled. "He's givin' Dan Bolton hell—" He stopped suddenly, seeing the blood-smeared faces and the ripped clothing. His eyes grew round and his mouth fell open. "I'll be damned," he said hoarsely. "I'll be damned!" The doors closed, and he darted back out to the street.

THE saloon emptied in a matter of minutes, leaving the stranger with his head propped against the brass rail. The bartender, hurriedly shedding his apron, made a run for the door, stopped, went back and got a pitcher of water and doused it over the head and shoulders of the stranger. Then sliding the pitcher down the bar he went on to join the others.

Senator Dooley Spence stood at the edge of the bunting-skirted platform, a broad smile on his florid features, his clenched fist beating the air dramatically. Several cowmen were on the platform with him, tilted back in rawhide chairs, and at one end, seated in front of a table made from a packing crate, Clay Chatsworth scribbled busily on yellow sheets of foolscap. He had a yellow kerchief knotted around his neck now, and his striped trousers were tucked neatly into the tops of his highly-polished hand-tooled boots. His stiff right arm held the paper while he wrote with the twisted upside-down motion of one not yet used to his left hand. The gun on his hip hung freely over the side of his chair. The Senator was winding up his short speech, and from the temper of the farmers gathered there Dan Bolton judged he had done a good job.

"I've just put the questions," the Senator thundered. "And now where is my worthy opponent who bragged so openly that he would answer them for you?" He made a burlesque of looking for Bolton, shading his eyes with his wide hand, leaning first this way, then that. The cattlemen roared in mirth, and the farmers shifted nervously, hanging their heads.

Dan Bolton pushed his way through the crowd, and he heard the ripple of comment grow to an ever-increasing wave that rolled along behind him.

"I'm here, Senator," he said, and he pulled himself up to the platform.

The ovation of the farmers mingled with the startled look of Spence and the surprised gasps of women who saw only the bloodstained face and the ripped clothing. Clay Chatsworth was on his feet, his face red with excitement. Then, before Dan could speak, the crowd parted in a wide aisle, and the stranger walked through, his hand on his gun. There was a set look about his face that made men fall back and give him room.

In that second of sharp silence all the old gun-fighter instinct came up in Dan Bolton. In that way he had he saw everything around him as clearly as if he had taken time to study each face individually. Senator Dooley Spence was waving a protesting arm—the cattlemen were on their feet. But it was Clay Chatsworth that Dan Bolton saw.

The editor's face had drained pasty white and there was no color in his lips. In the silence his voice was like a high pitched scream. *"That's Pinto Grout!"*

It was instinct, too, that sent Clay Chatsworth shattered arm toward his gun, its crippled swiftness forgotten. His hand went wide, he recovered himself and clawed wildly with his left hand. Pinto Grout, over the shock of hearing his name, had gone into a half crouch. His thin lips were drawn back from his white

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teeth and his hand made a blur of speed as it lifted the gun from its holster. It was all a matter of split seconds, and before Clay Chatsworth's left hand reached the distance across his middle Grout had his gun leveled, the hammer hooked back. He stood there then, a cold murderer, and the horrified crowd watched. It seemed that his finger had tightened against his trigger before Dan Bolton spoke. "Why don't you pick on a whole man, Grout?"

The metal in his voice made Pinto Grout turn, swinging his gun toward Dan Bolton's middle. Dan heard the roar and felt the shock of the bullet before his gun was half drawn. It seemed ages then before his sixgun was clear, and it was heavy in his hand as he lined it on Pinto Grout's forehead. There was another blast—another shock—and Dan Bolton fired. He was falling to the platform, face forward, and he could no longer hold the gun, but he knew his shot had been good.

HE'D been out four days, Ash Milligan told him that morning when he opened his eyes in his own bedroom. The doctor was there, and the relief on the old medico's face told Dan he had passed the worst of it. It was the bullet low in the left side that was causing the trouble. Jenny had made him understand that when she came to him the first night. But he knew now by the way he picked up during the next few days that it wouldn't be long. The weekly copy of the *Clarion* that Ash brought in then did more good than the doctor's medicine.

The editorial took over half the front page, and Ash Milligan was dancing with excitement. "You ought to see the *Clarion* office," Ash chortled. "That dad-blamed Clay Chatsworth is sitting out in front with two shotguns and a rifle and he's got a couple of farmers handin' out papers and two more standin' guard with guns. He says to tell you nobody tells him what to print."

Dan reached out and took the paper. He had a quick vision of Clay Chatsworth with his big hat and high heel boots when he saw that the *Clarion* still opposed the Bolton plan for expanding farming, but the rest of the editorial told him he was as good as in the State House.

> Under the circumstances, the *Clarion* feels it must publicly withdraw its support of Senator Dooley Spence. Any man, regardless of the cause he stands for, who would import a gunman of the ilk of Pinto Grout to intimidate voters. . . .

Dan skipped over a lot of it, for Clay Chatsworth had a way of throwing big words around. He went on down to where his own name was mentioned again.

> The *Clarion* is still not in accord with Dan Bolton's plan of having the State grant present leased range to bring the railroad into Wenton, but the *Clarion* is quick to admit its admiration of a man who so nobly and fearlessly stands for a cause. Dan Bolton is a champion of the farmer, and the *Clarion* is in possession of information from Oklahoma that conclusively proves he has always been so.

Dan put the paper aside and threw the covers back from the bed. His face was strained and white.

"Wait a minute now," Ash Milligan protested. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I got to go tell Jenny," Dan said. "Help me with my clothes, will you? Shake a leg there!"

"Now, Dan," Ash said, his voice strangely tight, "do you think you ought to?" For a long time he stood there, studying Bolton's face. After a while he shrugged and said, "All right, boy. If that's what you want."

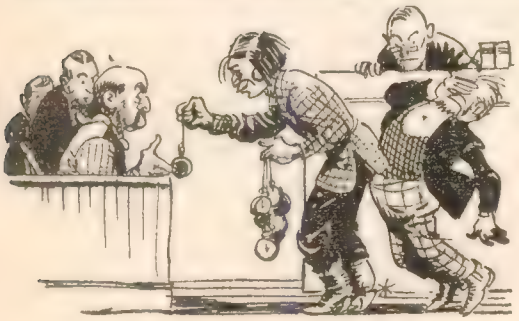
Ash helped him dress and supported him on his arm as they walked down the street. Dan had stopped in front of the house and waited while Ash picked a bunch of violets. On the street people paused and spoke, but they did not linger, for now they knew the way of the man called Dan Bolton.

At the top of the hill Ash Milligan waited and Dan Bolton went through the gate alone, taking the bunch of violets with him. He removed his hat and laid the violets on a grave, not three weeks old. The sun filtered through the tall cypress trees that swayed gently in the wind, and it threw deep shadows into the chiseled lettering on the head stone and outlined the few, simple words that were inscribed there:

IN MEMORY OF JENNY BOLTON

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

BY Robbins and Farren



Before Kirby Benedict became Supreme Court Justice of New Mexico, in 1853, he was hired, as a criminal lawyer, to defend a happy-go-lucky half-breed accused of stealing a dozen watches from a hotel in Taos. At the trial, Benedict's skilled oratory persuaded the jury that his client was not only wholly innocent as charged, but indeed, hardly knew a watch when he saw one. The lawyer was frankly astonished at the verdict of "not guilty," but the defendant was delighted. "I want to show my appreciation," he said, and passing down the jury box, the grinning breed presented to each of the twelve good men and true a fine gold turnip time-piece.

Young Harvard graduate Calkins Lee, later the soft-spoken Deputy Lee, of Dallas, first went West when he inherited a Texas Panhandle ranch from his uncle. His cattle were disappearing at an alarming rate, and after a thorough investigation he was convinced that a neighboring rancher was the thief. Puzzled over what to do next, the Easterner decided to write the rustler a firm note. In his best college English, he penned, "I shall appreciate it if you will refrain from your careless habit of leaving your hot branding irons in places where my cattle can lie down upon them."

Pike Landusky, two-fisted founder of Landusky, Montana, kept that town in constant terror of his trigger temper. After Pike had beaten up a man for accidentally stepping on his shadow, the town was riled. A professional fighter was imported and dressed in a skirt and bonnet. Escorted by pint-sized Cliff Bates, "she" moved down the street. As they passed Landusky, Bates boldly kicked the tyrant in the shins. When Pike swung, the "lady" went into action. Beaten to a pulp, the humbled bully never saw through his opponent's disguise, and the town never allowed him to forget his defeat at the hands of a parasol-toting "female."

The jail at Burnsville, Colorado, was the only lodging that Spec Krueger, penniless "retired" prospector, had known in a long time. For years, he avoided hotel bills by being sufficiently inebriated, come nightfall, to warrant confinement at the town's expense. Thus when an Eastern relative died, in 1895, and left the ancient codger a fortune, he eagerly looked about for an attractive house in which to spend his last years. After a long search, he decided that only one building in Burnsville looked like home to him, and he bought it—the jailhouse.

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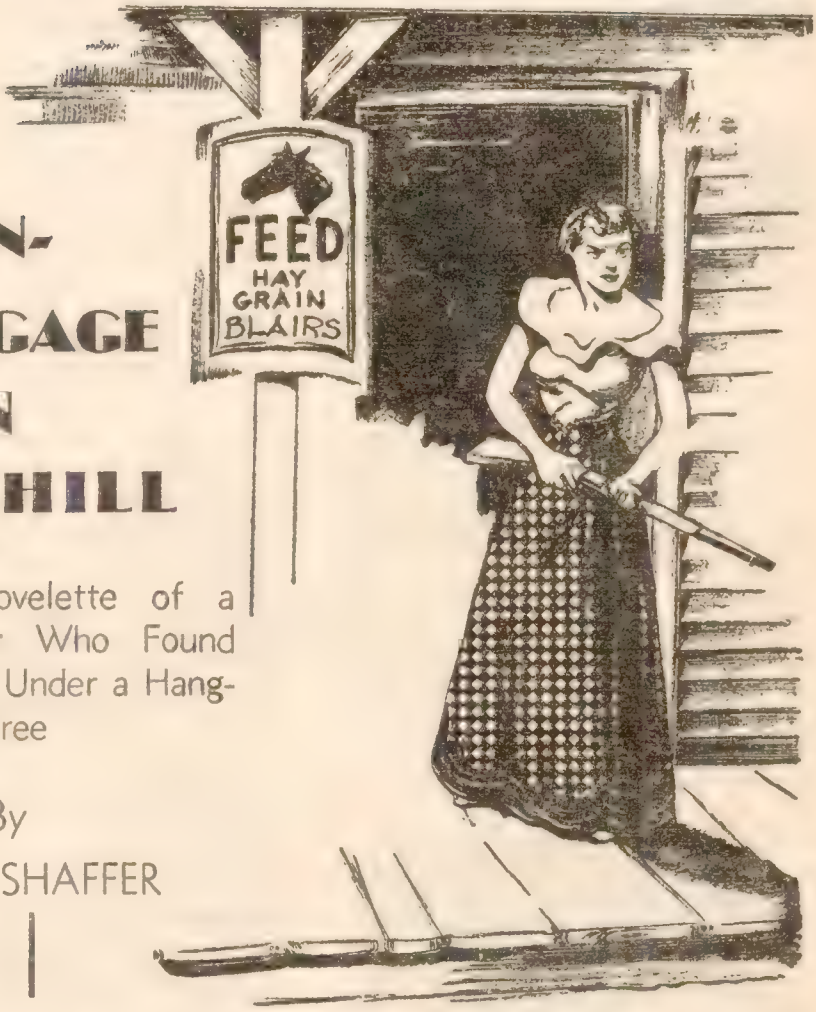
★

GUN-MORTGAGE ON BOOTHILL

Smashing Novelette of a Death-Hunter Who Found His Heritage Under a Hang-Tree

By JAMES SHAFFER



CHAPTER ONE

Coffins for Two

OLD HASP KINGERY stepped into the little log cabin and threw his hat at the deer horns nailed beside the door. "Thought I heard a painter scream up near the high pasture," he said. "Bud, you and Alf go up there and see what you can find."

Bud Kingery was repairing a saddle. His younger brother, Alf, was getting supper. Alf grunted sourly at the order, but Bud stood up obediently. "Come on, Alf," he said. "We'll walk up."

He got his Winchester from the rack and stepped outside, a tall, lithe man, nearing twenty-one, and walking more with the sinuous grace of a woodsman and trapper than a cattleman. He frowned slightly now, as he waited for Alf, and his deep grey eyes were troubled. Alf took his time about coming and his peevishness was plain when he stepped out of the cabin.

"What the hell!" he grumbled. "Pa knows there's no mountain lion in the high pasture. What's he mean?"

"Dunno," Bud answered. "Seems like something's been troubling him the last few days."

"Yeah," Alf said, "ever since he stayed out all night a couple weeks ago." He looked at his older brother. You reckon he rode into Bay City?"

Bud shook his head. "No Kingerys ever go to Bay City. You should damn well know that."

"Still," Alf insisted, "what's troubling him is in Bay City. I got that feeling."

As if by common consent, they paused at the edge of the clearing and looked back and down at the little cabin. The Kingery Bar K ranch was far back in the fastness of the mountains. For miles beyond the cabin, a wooded slope slanted gently downward, heading toward the lowlands and Bay City.

The high pasture was back of the cabin about a mile; a square mile clearing with a small lake in it. It held the Bar K's prize possession: a small band of blooded Colts.

"To hell with it!" Alf said suddenly. "I ain't going. It don't make sense!"

"He told us to," Bud answered. "I don't know why, but he wants us away from the cabin for a while."

"Just why I ain't going," Alf replied. "I'm going to sneak back down and find

Bud Kingery buried the bullet-riddled bodies of his dad and brother, then hit saddle to square the deal, not knowing he'd win final revenge and a brand new life — when the hangmen fitted the noose around his neck!

A girl was standing there, holding a rifle.

out what's the matter. If Pa's in trouble—"

"If he's in trouble, he can get out of it himself," Bud said sharply. "And that's what he wants to do. He don't want us in it. C'mon."

He turned and strode up the trail toward the high pasture. A hundred yards up, he turned, knowing Alf was not following him. He caught a glimpse of his brother slipping through the brush toward the cabin. For a moment he debated whether to go after him, then he shrugged.

Hasp Kingery was old, but he could still whale hell and damnation out of Alf, if he was a mind to. Bud frowned, wondering if his dad had made a mistake in not telling Alf some things that Bud knew; things that lay years ago on Hasp Kingery's backtrail. Well, he hadn't, he thought, and it was his dad's decision, not his. He went on to the high pasture.

As he'd known it would be, things were quiet in the pasture. A few frisky colts were still kicking up their heels, but most of them had bedded down for the night. Bud rolled a smoke, taking his time, knowing his dad wouldn't want him to return right away.

He was touching a match to it when the high, thin crack of a rifle ripped through the cold mountain air. He came to his feet with a curse, flinging the cigarette into the lake. The heavier, choking roar of a six-gun thundered on the heels of the rifle, and Bud was racing back down the trail toward the cabin.

HE'D gone less than fifty feet when the firing broke out again. The thin, whip-like crack of rifles mingled with the heavy, thudding blasts of sixguns. Alf's yell came to him on the thin mountain air.

"I'm coming, Pa! Hold 'em!"

"Take to the hills, son!" Hasp Kingery called to Alf. "Don't git in this! Take to the hills!"

Bud was running hard down the trail. The Winchester was unhandy, it caught in the brush alongside the trail, but he lifted it high and raced on, his legs pumping with every ounce of strength that was in them.

The firing reached a new intensity; mostly sixguns now, and that meant that his dad and brother weren't doing much shooting. They relied on Winchesters and seldom used belt guns. Then a new voice broke in; a strange voice that Bud had never heard.

"The old hellion's hit! Rush 'em now! Git all three!"

Bud saw the gun flashes through the trees now; another couple hundred yards and he'd be in the clearing.

"Hell, there ain't but two of 'em!" a man shouted.

"There's three of 'em, I tell you!" the first man hollered. "And we gotta wipe out the whole damn bunch!"

Bud cursed as his pumping legs carried him to the clearing. This was why Hasp had sent him and Alf off on a wild goose chase—to get them out of the way; to keep them clear of the massacre he knew was coming.

He'd reached the clearing now; and not a moment too soon. Men, mere shadowy figures in the growing dusk, were racing for the cabin, orange flame lancing from their guns. Bud dropped to one knee, the Winchester centering on one of those figures. He didn't see the hulking shadow to his left until too late.

The gun flamed in the man's hand. A blinding light shattered the world. Bud twisted, trying to line his rifle, but the strength was flowing from his arms. He sprawled forward in engulfing blackness. . . .

Heat and crackling sound hit him when he struggled back to consciousness. He opened his eyes into the bright glare of flames, and from a long distance, it seemed, he heard his name being called.

"Bud! Wake up! Bud! Oh, God, let him wake up in time!"

He rolled over, blinking his eyes to bring the blurred figure nearby into focus. Then his mind cleared, and he realized he was on the floor of the cabin; that the cabin roof was a mass of flames. Alf lay a few feet away, half propped up on the saddle Bud had been repairing.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Git out—git out!" Alf mumbled. "Before the roof caves in! She'll go any minute!"

He got to his knees then, and looked about. The sight of the red splotch on Alf's chest drove dull, aching shock through his body, and the sight of a crumpled figure near the door brought driving pain with the shock. He came fully alive then and stooped over to pick up Alf.

"There ain't time, Bud," Alf whimpered.

Bud got his arms under Alf, heaved and

staggered through the door. He laid the bullet-shattered body near the door and turned back.

The heat was intense, and he flung his arm up to guard his face. He took a deep breath and groped in the smoke till he found Hasp's broken body and stumbled once more into the flame-lit night. But he knew before he rolled his dad over that it was no use; that he had merely saved his body for a decent burial. He went over to Alf.

His younger brother grinned weakly as Bud started ripping his shirt into bandages and attempted to stop the blood flow. Alf shook his head feebly, and Bud wiped away the crimson froth on his lips.

"It's no use, Bud. When they dragged you into the cabin I saw that you were just creased. I kept praying you'd wake up in—time to get clear . . . You did . . . so everything's all right—"

"Who did it, Alf?" Bud asked. "Who was it?"

"Never got a look at them," Alf said weakly. "Don't even know how many there were."

"Did Pa tell you who they were?"

Alf was getting weaker with each passing second, and Bud had to bend low to catch his words. "Heard 'im say something about going—back—to Bay City . . . Gimme a drink—"

He ran down to the well and filled the bucket with water. The last wall of the cabin collapsed with a shower of sparks as he ran back to Alf. He thought for a moment his brother was already dead, but then he caught the feeble flicker of life. He scooped up a palm full of water and held it to Alf's lips.

"Alf!" There was raw urgency in his voice. "You got to give me something to go on, Alf! Try hard!"

The eyes opened a moment, then steadied on Bud's face. "Pa said they were greedy—greedy—" The eyes closed, as Bud knelt there, holding a handful of water to his brother's lips.

"Greed. Bay City."

He stood up. There was smoky hell in his grey eyes as they shuttled from the dying embers of the cabin to the two still figures on the ground. He found saddle blankets and covered them. He would bury them when he got a chance.

"Greed. Bay City. It ain't much, Alf. But it's enough. I'll make it enough!"

CHAPTER TWO

Trap for a Kingery

THE sun was still young next morning when he finished the burial and heaped rocks on the two new mounds. He did what few chores were necessary, then caught up his big, chesty black and threw Alf's saddle on the animal. His own saddle was a blackened hulk in the embers of the cabin.

He found his rifle where he'd dropped it the night before, and counted his cartridges. Five. The money in his pocket, though, would buy a new Colt sixgun when he reached Bay City, and there'd be plenty left over for shells.

Bitter thoughts racked his mind as he rode along. Bay City. He wondered what kind of reception awaited him there; then his mind turned to the grimmer side. It was what kind of reception he intended to give Bay City.

He and Alf had never been allowed to go to Bay City. Alf had often wondered why; but Bud had his own ideas. There had been smoky spots on old Hasp Kingery's backtrail. Long years ago he'd ridden the dim trails. But when his young wife had died, leaving him two boys to raise, he'd left the owlhoot and gone straight.

Old Hasp had burrowed deep into the mountains and built his little Bar K ranch, and he'd raised his two young 'uns right and proper. Bud could dimly remember his dad making a trip or two to Bay City in those first years they'd settled the Bar K.

And he remembered the anger that had roiled old Hasp when he'd returned from one of those visits. Old Hasp had drunk long from the big jug he kept in the closet, and he'd cursed and raved in his drunkenness.

Something about paying his debt to society, Bud remembered as he rode along. Something about paying his debt to society and havin' the right to walk in any town."

But Old Hasp had never gone back to Bay City. They'd done their trading at a small mining village far back in the mountains after that. And Bud had guessed why. Hasp had been run out of Bay City, and told to say out.

Alf had been too young to remember. But But thought of Hasp growling about Sheriff Hoskins, who'd ordered the Kingerys to stay out of Bay City; that Bay City was a clean town and didn't tolerate outlaws and killers within its limits.

And now a Kingery was riding in—riding in to kill. Bud had never broken the law. And he didn't know whether Bay City would call this killing breaking the law or not. If it did . . . He shrugged.

He pushed the black hard, and it was mid-afternoon when he topped a small knoll. Below him lay the town. He pulled the black up and stared down at it for long minutes. A right peaceful looking place; almost a sleepy little town, with its dusty, crooked main street, its false-fronted business structures and its scattered houses with their shade trees.

Yes, he thought, a peaceful enough looking town, on the surface. But somewhere down there was a greedy killer who had ordered a band of murderers to wipe out a whole family.

At that thought, Bud pulled the black up and sat there thinking. Up until now he'd had no definite plan of action. He realized suddenly that he would be a total stranger in town, and he might have difficulty in getting any information. But he knew, too, that, as far as Bay City was concerned, the Kingery clan was dead.

There was a grim smile on his lips. "My riding is gonna give some hombre one helluva jolt!" He slid his rifle from the saddle scabbard under his leg and levered a shell into the chamber.

"And the minute I see him get that jolt," he thought, "I'm gonna give him another one—right in the guts!"

He thought over the plan as the black dropped down the hill and hit the dusty road leading into town. It seemed foolproof. There had been five or six men in the band; he'd counted that many by the gunfire, and he might not be able to get them all right away. But the first one of that band that spotted him would surely show his surprise. And Bud would kill him.

It would, he reckoned be simple to round up that man's friends, after that. He shifted the rifle from the crook of his arm as the black shuffled through the dust at the edge of town. A frown twisted Bud's features as he rode down the main street.

Bay City seemed deserted. No horses lined the hitchracks along the street, no people were on the sidewalks. He peered from under the brim of his hat, trying to see into the stores, but they seemed to be doing no trade at this hour.

Puzzled, he rode on, his eyes shifting constantly. He saw two women hurrying along the street a block away; two old men sitting in front of the livery stable, whittling.

He was passing a building when a quick movement caught his eye. He turned quickly in the saddle; getting one look at a surprised face at a window. The face disappeared instantly, and Bud jerked the black around.

He hauled to a stop and leaped to the ground, rifle at the alert, when the door of the building flung open. A girl was standing there, holding a shotgun.

BUD stared stupidly for a moment, and didn't jerk out of his reverie until the muzzle of the shotgun wiggled ominously. Then he hastily dropped the rifle. He was aware that a few women were watching him curiously; that the two old men at the livery had gone inside, and were stepping back in sight with guns.

"Step inside, Kingery!" The girl's voice carried a ring of authority in it. Bud glanced upward, and another shock ran through him. A sign over the door of the building read SHERIFF'S OFFICE. He grinned as he stepped into the office.

"You the sheriff?" he chuckled. "Must be electing them on account of their looks nowadays. Shore pretty."

"I'm not the sheriff, and keep your hands up till I get someone in here to search you!"

"Why don't you do it yourself?" he grinned. "You captured me."

Her face turned red. It made her look twice as pretty, Bud thought. But the shotgun didn't waver. There was a shuffle of feet outside, and the two old men came in.

"Search him, Jeff. See if he's got a hideout," the girl told one of them, and the oldster ran his hands over Bud.

"Nothing but a knife," the old man grunted as he finished. "Who in tarnation is he, Myra?"

"He's a Kingery, that's who he is!" the girl said swiftly.

Bud's eyes narrowed as the two old men sucked in their breath sharply and

looked at him with renewed interest. There was hostility in those looks, too.

"Can't you tell by his features?" the girl asked.

The men peered closely, and Bud flushed. "Danged if he ain't!" one oldster exclaimed. "A Kingery, by God! Riding into town like he owned the place!"

Bud lowered his hands. "That's enough," he snapped. "What the hell does all this mean?"

"It means I'm locking you up," the girl said. The shotgun was still lined on his middle.

"And what authority?" Bud demanded. "And what for?"

"I'm Myra Hoskins," the girl said. "My father's the sheriff here—and I'm locking you up until he gets back. But don't ask me why," she added bitterly.

Bud frowned in perplexity. He didn't know what to make of all this, but one thing was certain. His appearance in town, and the girl's recognizing him as a Kingery, had touched off the excitement. He wondered where all the men of the town were, then put the thought out of his mind as Myra jabbed him with the shotgun.

"First cell on your way back," she said crisply. "Dad and the posse ought to be back tonight with the rest of your family."

"Bud's eyebrows shot up. Then he grinned, but it wasn't a pleasant grin. "Is that who they're looking for?"

"Don't try to be funny," Myra snapped.

"I'm not being funny," he said. "Not about the rest of my family." The shotgun muzzle was prodding him again. He let it prod.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said politely, "but it don't suit my convenience to go to jail right now." His right hand swung in a short, quick arc. The shotgun muzzle jerked ceilingward, clearing Bud's head by inches before it roared harmlessly. The office shook with the concussion.

The two oldsters were dragging at their sixguns, but Bud was already moving. He lowered his shoulder and rammed the nearest. He went off-balance and staggered into the other man. Then he leaped for the gun rack behind the big office desk. He grabbed a belted sixgun, jerked it out and turned.

"Easy!" he snapped. "Now unbuckle those belts and let 'em drop!" With hangdog looks, the two oldsters complied. "And you, Miss Hoskins," he rapped out. The girl was bending over the shotgun. "If you pick that shotgun up, I'll shoot it out of yours hands! Let it alone!"

Myra straightened, tears of rage welling in her eyes. "You won't get away with this!" she stormed. "The posse'll be back in a few hours, and they'll follow you. They'll track you down, no matter how far you go!"

Bud grinned and buckled on the gunbelt. "I'll borrow this for a while," he said. "Nope, on second thought, I'll buy it." He dug some bills out of his pocket and dropped them on the desk. Then he looked at the girl. "Who said I was going anywhere?" he asked softly.

She stared at him a moment, a puzzled frown on her face. "What good do you think you can do by staying in town?" she asked.

"I don't know what's been going on here," Bud snapped. "But it looks like the Kingerys got blamed for it, whatever it was. Bank robbery?"

The girl's chin lifted. "As if you didn't know!"

"What time?" Bud asked one of the old men.

" 'Bout five this morning," the man replied.

Bud grinned tightly. "It won't be hard to prove that the Kingerys had nothing to do with that," he said bitterly, and then broke off. The sound of hoofbeats came from the end of town. The girl and the two men cocked their heads, listening. Then, suddenly, the girl sprang.

She leaped for the door, cleared it in one jump and raced up the street. Bud watched her through the window. A band of horsemen was riding into town, a tall gray haired man wearing a badge, in the lead. His weariness sloughed off at sight of the girl, and he reined in.

"Dad!" Myra's voice was loud in the quiet. "One of them—a Kingery—in your office! Watch yourself!"

Bud cursed bitterly. His only chance of surprising his kinsmen's killers had gone forever. Everybody in Bay City knew a Kingery was in town. The killers, whoever and wherever they were, would know that they had slipped up on the job. They'd left one Kingery alive—and he was in Bay City.

CHAPTER THREE

Chore for a Pair of Fives

THERE'D be no chance of his surprising the killers now. It was the other way around. He didn't know who they were; they did know who he was. It was they who could surprise him, now.

He watched the posse come to a halt and the girl talk to her father. And his eyes were searching every man's face in the posse. But the chance was gone. If the killers were in that bunch, they had their feelings and surprise under control by now.

The posse began to spread out a little, as if making the first move to surround the jail building. The two old men began to fidget. Any minute some trigger-itchy posseman might start sending lead crashing into the office.

"Figure on holding us as hostages?" one old-timer asked.

Bud grunted. "The door's open," he said, "and I ain't stopping you." They scuttled for the door, and Bud called after them. "Tell Sheriff Hoskins I'd like to palaver with him."

He watched the two hurry over to the posse and talk to Hoskins. The sheriff nodded and swung out of saddle. Myra was protesting as he strode toward the jail, but he spoke reassuringly to her and continued.

It was then that a man rode out of the posse and alongside the sheriff. He was tall, dressed in town garb. His long nose and close-set eyes gave his narrow face a cruel look. When he spoke, it was in a dry, nasal twang.

"Careful, Sheriff," he called out, "that man in there is a Kingery and a killer. Be ready to duck, and the boys and I'll cover you the minute he fires."

The lawman turned and faced the man in the saddle. "Hold your fire, Lufkin, and that's an order. You been too damn ready to shoot at every stranger we've met on the trail!"

The thick lips of the hawk-faced man twisted downward and he jerked his horse cruelly back to the posse. Bud saw him talking in low tones with two other men, and his eyes narrowed. There was something about Lufkin he didn't like. Then he shrugged. He couldn't go by feelings in this matter. He had to know. But he was going to find out more about Lufkin. He put the man out of his mind as Hoskins stepped casually through the front door.

Bud grinned. The sheriff's hands were swinging easily at his sides. There were no dramatics about drawing his gun, or entering with his hand on his gun.

"Hello, Sheriff," Bud said.

He felt the level gaze of the sheriff's blue eyes as the man deliberately looked him over.

"You're a Kingery, all right," the sheriff said finally. "It's written all over your face. Which one are you?"

"Bud. Hasp Kingery's oldest son."

The sheriff rolled a smoke. When he got it going, he said quietly, "That posse's been out trying to track down the Kingery family."

"That won't be hard to do," Bud said softly. "All three are where you can easily get to them, Sheriff."

"That right?" Hoskins' eyebrows rose a little.

"Alf and Pa are dead." Bud lifted his hat, showing the bandage. "They thought I was, too."

"Who are 'they?' "

Bud dropped a hand to his sixgun. "That's what I'm in town to find out."

Hoskins started to say something, but was interrupted by men crowding into the office door. The crowd was led by Lufkin. The man had a gun in his hand, a fancy, pearl-handled six-shooter, cocked and pointed at Bud's stomach.

"What're you waiting for, Sheriff?" Lufkin demanded. "Lafe, go over and lift Kingery's iron!"

Lafe was a squat man with a knife scar over one eye. He moved forward, and Bud stepped aside, putting Lafe between himself and Lufkin.

"Lafe'll get a slug in his guts if he tries to lift that gun!" Bud snapped.

That rocked Lafe back on his heels, his black eyes glittering dangerously, his stubby hand dropping near his own six.

"Lafe, put that gun away," Sheriff Hoskins said. "And clear out of this office. I'm running this."

"Just what I'm saying," Lufkin said loudly. "Here you've got a Kingery right in your hands, and you hesitate about putting him in jail." He turned and his eyes swept the crowd behind him. "A man gets

too old to wear a badge," he said meaningly. "It's no disgrace, but it's just time for a younger man to take over."

Bud saw the dubious, half-believing looks of the crowd in the doorway, and he grinned a little at Lufkin's bold talk.

"A man like Lafe, for instance," the sheriff said dryly. "All right, Lufkin. We all know you're trying to get your own man in office. But right now—get out of here—all of you! I want to talk to Kingery alone."

The crowd retreated slowly, sullenly, reluctant to turn their hate-ridden eyes away from Bud. When the office was empty, the sheriff shut the door.

"I take it there was a bank robbery and the Kingerys got blamed for it," Bud said as Hoskins sat down.

The sheriff nodded.

"What evidence is there that the Kingerys did it? No—wait—let me tell you. Lufkin thought he recognized the Kingerys."

Hoskins stared at Bud a moment. "You guessing, or did somebody tell you?"

"Guessing. Did you ride by the Bar K?"

The lawman nodded. "Found the cabin burned down—and two fresh graves."

"That's Pa and Alf in those graves," Bud said. "Seems like that oughta about clear the Kingerys of the blame."

"Not as far as Bay City is concerned," the lawman replied. "Lufkin and Lafe Oliver fired at the bandits, claimed there was five or six of them. It wasn't daylight yet, and they couldn't be sure. When we found the graves and all the Kingerys gone, the posse figured that there had been an argument over the split. The Kingerys, they figured, killed those two men and burned their shack and lit out with the loot."

"And who done that kind of figuring?" Bud asked. Hoskins flushed, but didn't answer. Bud nodded. "Lufkin again. Here's what happened last night."

QUICKLY, concisely, he told Hoskins of the last hours of his father and brother, and of the previous nervousness of the old man.

"I figure it this way," he concluded. "Whoever pulled that job, asked Pa to go in with them on it, and Pa refused. That meant that they had to kill Pa to keep him from telling the law. And since they weren't sure but what Pa might tell me and Alf about it, they had to kill us, too." He paused a moment, and his voice dropped. "And I think I've got my man."

"I know what you're thinking," the sheriff said. "But that's circumstantial evidence. You've got no proof."

Bud said, "The only clue I've got at all is that Pa said the man who did it was greedy. Greed done it. An unselfish man, Sheriff, is content with three meals a day and a roof over his head." He paused. "A greedy man never gets enough. Lufkin is the richest man in town, ain't he?"

"Lufkin is president of the bank that was robbed," the sheriff replied. "He owns a fair-sized ranch, and he's buying up property that he figures will be valuable when the railroad hits Bay City."

Bud nodded. "He's my man."

"Like hell!" the lawman ripped out. "You've got no real evidence against Lufkin or anybody else. What you've got wouldn't hold up in court five minutes!"

"Who said anything about evidence for a jury to think over?"

The lawman came to his feet and walked around the desk. Spraddle-legged, he stood over Bud. "You try to kill anybody on that evidence in my town and I'll hang you higher'n a kite," he said coldly. "You get out of town, Kingery—before dark!"

" 'Fraid not, Sheriff."

"I'm ordering you out," the sheriff said. "Just like I ordered your pa out, years ago. Bay City don't want your kind here. This town is clean—and it's going to stay clean!"

Bud got to his feet, fighting back the rage welling in him. "This town is dirty and rotten to the core," he snapped. "You've got killers and bandits here—but because they hide behind a mask of respectability they're clean! You hide your eyes to that, when there's somebody like the Kingerys handy to pack the blame onto." He walked to the door and jerked it open. "I came to Bay City to do a chore, and I'm staying till I do it!"

He slammed the door and strode up the street. The possemen were still loitering along the sidewalk. A knot of men gave ground grudgingly as Bud strode forward, and reluctantly opened a path for him. He strode on without looking back, and walked into the lobby of the hotel. The clerk hesitated a moment, so Bud jerked the register over and scrawled his name across

the page. When he had finished, the clerk had his key ready.

Up in his room, he lighted the lamp and flung himself across the bed. He cursed bitterly in a low monotone. Lufkin was behind the killing of his kin. He was sure of it. But to make a move against him would put him on the outlaw trail for life. And there was no evidence to take Lufkin to court. He was turning the facts of the whole case over in his mind when a heavy tread sounded outside his door. He rolled over and sat up, his gun in his fist.

"Kingery?" Hoskins' voice came through the door.

"Come in," Bud grunted. The lawman stepped inside, and in the gathering dark Bud could see the gun in Hoskins' fist.

"I meant what I said about you leaving town, Kingery."

"And if I don't?"

"In that case," Hoskins said dryly, "I'm not sure that you'd even be safe in jail. There's lynch talk going around."

Bud sat up straight. "Lynch talk?" he muttered. "Lufkin's—"

"There's nothing to show that Lufkin is starting the lynch talk," the lawman countered.

Bud laughed. "Lufkin's got to kill me, because he's not sure that Pa didn't tell me what he knew. Don't you see that, Sheriff?"

The lawman frowned, started to reply. At that instant the window pane shattered into a thousand pieces. The tinkle of the broken glass mingled with the roar of a shot. Bud flung himself to the floor, his finger exploring the long ugly welt the bullet had raised along his neck. He looked at the lawman, and for the first time saw doubt written on the man's face.

He grinned and felt the welt on his neck again. A half-formed idea was taking shape in his mind. He got to his feet, careful to stay away from the shattered window.

"Sheriff, you're right," he said. "I'm leaving town. I want you to escort me out of town. Take me down to my horse and tell me to git on my horse and ride. And do it so the whole town'll know you're running me out."

Hoskins nodded. "You've got an idea. Want to tell me what it is?"

"Wouldn't do any good," Bud told him. "If it works, okay. If it don't—no need to tell you. Let's go!"

IT WAS dark when they got down on the street, but the street lights were lit. They hadn't gone thirty feet before the word had passed that Bud Kingery was being thrown out of town. So Bay City turned out to watch.

At the sheriff's office, Hoskins told Bud to get his horse and ride. Kingery nodded and climbed on the black. Bay City watched in sullen, dubious silence. It took the town by surprise, the sheriff turning a Kingery loose; and before any one could protest, or argue the point, Bud was galloping into the night.

He held the black to a distance-eating lope for fifteen minutes, then pulled abruptly to a stop. He figured it was about time; that by now a man could have sneaked out of town to follow him without arousing suspicion. He slid off the pony and untied his lass rope.

"Now, if my guess is right!" he muttered and dropped flat on the ground. With his ear pressed against the earth, he caught the faint drumming of hoofs. "One horse," he muttered, "and coming fast." He climbed back in the saddle, shook out his lass rope and waited.

The hoofbeats sounded louder, and he made out the dark form of the horse and rider as they thundered along the trail. As the horse drew abreast, he cast his loop.

The rider cursed luridly as the rope settled around his shoulders. Bud jerked the rope tight and gigged the black. The rider came out of the saddle, hitting the ground with a jar. The freed horse galloped off. Bud leaped to the ground and kicked the man's gun out of his hand.

"Kinda expected you, Lafe," Bud grunted. "Planning to finish the job you started last night at the Bar K, was you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lafe snarled.

Bud picked up Lafe's gun. He drew his own and stuffed them both in the bedroll behind his saddle. Lafe was struggling to get the rope off.

"I aim to jog your memory for you, boy," Bud told him. "Hurry and git that rope off!"

Lafe did just that. He flung it off his shoulder and surged to his feet. He charged but Bud stopped him with a jolting right. Lafe staggered back, mouthing curses, and Bud went after him.

He fought with the cold fury of pure hatred. He first slashed light, infuriating blows at Lafe's face. Lafe charged and Bud smashed him in the stomach and waded in.

He worked on the face until it was a pulpy red mess. The man sobbed in pain, and Bud drove in with fresh fury. His open palm smacked Lafe's raw, bleeding face. "You're a brave man, Lafe," Bud gritted. "Brave enough to sneak up on a man in his own home and shoot him down like a dog!" He drove his fist square into Lafe's teeth, feeling them crunch and give way.

Lafe screamed like an animal and rushed blindly forward into the murderous fists that he couldn't see; that he couldn't dodge, and that were pounding him into an insensible hulk.

Lafe went down, then, too beaten to even try to break his fall. Bud hauled him to his feet. He was a little sick at the stomach by now; sick at the sight of what he'd done to Lafe. But the memory of two fresh graves back on the blood-bathed Bar K drove him on. He drew back and smashed his fist into Lafe's face.

"Talk, damn you!"

Lafe shook his head dumbly. Bud drew his fist back again; let go. He was holding Lafe up now with one hand, beating him with the other.

"Talk! Talk, damn you! or I'll beat you to death!"

The man was staring stupidly. Bud drew back again. A croak sounded from Lafe. Bud hesitated a moment, then shook the man.

Lafe croaked again. "No—more! I'll talk! Don't hit me again!"

"You know what I want to hear," Bud snarled.

"You know it already," Lafe mumbled through shredded lips. "Lufkin and the crew that works his ranch. Lufkin tried to get Hasp Kingery to throw in with him on the robbery. Hasp wouldn't so he signed his own death warrant."

"Where's the money?" Bud demanded.

Lafe shook his head. "Don't know. Lufkin hid it—"

"You're lying!" Bud snarled and drew his fist back.

"God, no!" Lafe cringed. "I ain't lying—so help me—I'm telling you the truth!"

"How'd you like to be worked over some more?"

"I—can't stand any more! You promised if I told—you'd quit—"

"I want you to tell Hoskins what you just told me. You'll do that? Or do I have to—"

"I'll tell him."

Bud climbed onto the black. He took the two guns from the bedroll, shoving one in his holster and the other down into his boot.

"Your horse spooked, so we'll ride double into town," he told Lafe. "You ride the saddle. I'll be right behind—with a gun." He helped the beaten man climb into the saddle and they started back for town.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Gun

LAFE lolled in the saddle, and Bud had to hold him up as the black ate up the distance to Bay City. At the edge of town, Bud heaved a sigh of relief at the light shining in the sheriff's office.

"We're heading straight for the sheriff," he told Lafe. "Minute we get there, start talking. Before Lufkin knows we're in town."

Lafe nodded feebly, and for a moment Bud relaxed his vigilance. He turned to scan the lamplit streets of the town, and in that instant Lafe acted.

With one heave he left the saddle and hit the ground in a staggering run. Bud cursed and lifted his gun, then changed his mind and spurred the black after him. Lafe was no good to him dead.

"Boss! Boss!" Lafe's voice roared through the streets. Bud leaned out of the saddle to grab the man, and at that instant an orange tongue of flame spurted from a darkened doorway, followed by the thunderclap of a pistol shot. Lafe stumbled. He screamed once in mortal fear, then plunged full-length into the dust.

Bud hauled the black to a stop and quit the saddle. He saw the man who had fired running for an alley. He let go a shot and missed. He thumbed back for another, then cursed as the man disappeared into the alley. He knelt beside Lafe and turned him over. The man was dead.

Boots pounded as Sheriff Hoskins ran up. Already Bay City was coming to life. Men were pouring out of saloons; gathering on the sidewalks and moving toward them.

"What happened?" Hoskins snapped.

"I figured if I left town, Lufkin would send a man after me to put a slug in my back. I was right." He indicated Lafe's battered features. "I made Lafe talk and was bringing him in to tell it to you. But Lufkin wasn't taking any chances," he added bitterly. "He saw me bringing Lafe in and must have guessed what happened. So . . ." He shrugged.

"You say Lafe confessed to you?" the sheriff asked, his gaze boring into Bud.

"He did."

The lawman took a deep breath. "Then I'll side you in this till you're in the clear," he said slowly. "Where did Lafe say the money was? Knowing that, we can trap Lufkin."

A cold knot balled up in Bud's stomach. He glanced up the street. A solid knot of men was moving this way now; men who moved along purposefully. The street lights of Bay City flickered on the steel of drawn guns. He could feel Hoskins' eyes on him, waiting for his answer.

"Lafe didn't know where the money was," Bud told him slowly. He could see the suspicion flare in the man's eyes, the lawman's body stiffen with doubt.

"That's pretty thin," Hoskins said. "If Lafe talked at all he must have told you the whole works."

"That's the hell of it!" Bud said dully. "I'm sure that Lafe told me all he knew!"

"There he is, boys!" Lufkin's voice lifted in a yell. "This time we won't waste no time. He's added murder to his other crimes. I saw him shoot Lafe down in cold blood! If that bungling sheriff of ours won't do anything, we'll do it ourselves. Git him!"

It was all the crowd needed. With a sullen roar it increased its speed; it fanned out and surrounded Bud and Hoskins; it closed in tight and Bud twisted in the grip of half a dozen men.

"We'll use the cottonwood by the blacksmith shop!" Lufkin yelled. "Bring him along, boys!"

Bud offered no resistance as the crowd closed in around him. He waited a moment, for Sheriff Hoskins' voice. But it never came. He twisted around looking for the lawman, but the sheriff was nowhere in sight. He was swallowed up in the crowd. It was then that Bud started to fight.

He twisted free of some of the hands, and lunged through the crowd. He started slugging right and left, trying to fight his way clear, only to hear the taunting voice of Lufkin lifted high.

"He's trapped, boys! He can't get away! Grab 'im! Hurry it up! The drinks are on me as soon as the job is finished!"

Bud tried to fight clear, but it was useless. They half pushed, half dragged him down the street to the cottonwood tree and shoved the noose down over his head. Willing hands led a horse over and they forced him into the saddle. A cheer went up as the crowd cleared a space near the horse. One man stepped into the small clearing, his quirt lifted to whip the pony and leave Bud dangling. Bud looked over the heads of the men. Lufkin stood alone, away from the crowd. His arms were folded and there was a satisfied smile on his face. The quirt lifted high, and a hush fell over the crowd.

AND it was in that moment of cold silence that Bud spoke. "Just a moment, my friend," he said quietly. The very quietness of his voice stopped the man; the very quietness of his voice kept the crowd silent, waiting to catch his next words. Bud leaned down out of the saddle, as if speaking confidentially to the man holding the quirt.

"Don't this whole business strike you as kind of queer?" he asked quietly.

The man with the quirt blinked in surprise. The crowd was pressing forward, curious at this turn of events.

"Does what strike me as queer?" the man with the quirt grunted.

"If you ran a bank, and somebody robbed it, wouldn't you be interested in getting the money back?"

"I shore as hell would!" the man snorted angrily. "Cut the palaver!" He raised the quirt again.

Bud felt the cold sweat break out on his forehead. But he forced his voice to stay calm and casual; to maintain a conversational tone.

"If you hang me," Bud said, "the bank'll never get the money back. Lufkin knows that—*but he's the man that wants me hung!*"

A sigh ran through the crowd, and the man with the switch scratched his chin. He lowered the quirt.

"What the hell's the holdup?" Lufkin shouted. The banker was pushing his way

through the crowd. "What's the matter?" he demanded of the man with the quirt. "Your blood turn to water! Gimme that quirt!"

"The folks want to know why you want me hung, Lufkin," Bud said quickly. "Why are you more interested in hanging me than making me turn the money back?"

"Yeah, Lufkin," the man with the quirt grunted. "That doesn't make sense. Mebbe you better explain—"

"To hell with that!" the banker snarled. "If you won't whip that horse, I will!"

He turned and raised his hand, ready to slap it down sharply on the horse's rump. The crowd stood still, undecided. Bud winced and stiffened his body against the numbing shock that was coming. He felt a throb of despair; realizing how close he'd come to victory, only to have it snatched away at the last moment.

"Hold it, Lufkin." Sheriff Hoskins' voice grated like a file on steel. The lawman had worked his way silently through the crowd, and his sixgun bore on the banker's stomach. His next words were almost a whisper. "Bud Kingery made a lot of accusations against you when he hit town. They didn't make sense then, but since you're so hell bent on killing him, I'm—"

Lufkin's curse was almost a sob of rage. He flung himself sideways and his hand darted downward. The gun in Sheriff Hoskins' hand roared twice. The first shot spun Lufkin around, screaming in pain. The second parted the rope above Bud's head as the spooked horse lunged forward. . . .

* * *

"Don't know just when I started to believe your wild tales," Hoskins told Bud. He turned and looked into the cells back of his office. Lufkin and four of his ranch crew lounged sullenly back there. "Maybe it was my conscience," the lawman went on. "You see, when I ran Hasp Kingery out of town a long time ago, it was Lufkin who urged me to do it."

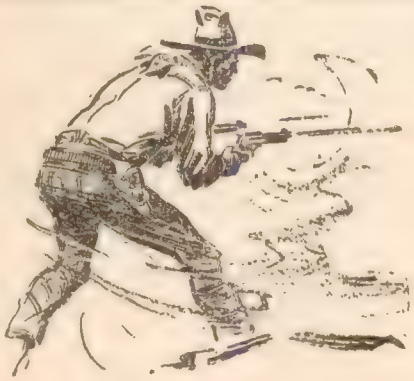
"Lufkin had ridden the dim trails with Pa," Bud said. "And with Lufkin posing as an honest banker, he couldn't have the old man hanging around Bay City. On the other hand, he wanted him close to help out on some jobs."

Hoskins nodded. "Funny," he said. "Your dad went straight, and was accused of still being crooked. Lufkin played honest, but was still a crook underneath."

Myra Hoskins stepped through the door and overheard the last remark. "It just goes to show," she said smilingly, "that you can't judge a person the first time you meet them." She blushed. "I mean, you're liable to say something you really didn't mean—"

Bud grinned. He was going to like getting acquainted with Myra Hoskins. The more he was around her, the better he was going to like it.

THE END



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CREED OF THE BURYIN' SHERIFF

Up-to-date folks said Justin Purcell looked like a heller out of the old West when he trod the streets in his ancient frock coat, with a cap-and-ball pistol in his horny hand. But Purcell had an old-time creed as hard and as modern as newly-laid steel: That a sheriff worth his salt must bring in his man, alone, against any and all odds—and to hell with his wife and kids!

IT WAS like old Justin Purcell to arrive in town standing in the bed of his careening buckboard braced against the spring seat, his team of Morgans lathered into a full run. He had been about the last to hear word of the hold-up, and he had come down from his stock ranch—eighteen miles of mountain road—in a little under one hour. He slewed around the bend at the edge of town, throwing mud across the rip-rap sidewalk outside the church, and lay back on the lines in front of the livery stable.

"I'd oughta been the first to know," he panted as he leaped to the street and let the team find their way into the stable. "Two hours late they drop by with the word." In the old days, he was thinking, he would have been first to know of a hold-up. "Woulda probably known ahead of time, when I was sheriff. Now they don't bother to tell me till the loser's buried in six feet of Montana dobie."

Two blocks down the street at the other end of town, the end where the old driving trail dropped to the drawline ferry across the Yellowstone, he saw a knot of men gathered behind a low barricade of grain sacks and baled hay. They were under fire from someone out of his sight beyond. He gathered by the way they moved half-crouched, under fire from someone down the slope toward the river.

As he watched, a man raised up cautiously, lifting a long barreled rifle. A small cloud of white smoke bloomed suddenly and the thunder of black powder reverberated between the buildings.

"Old Sam Cameron and his smoothbore!" Justin exploded. "What kind of a fight is this, with old men and small boys driftin' around like flies around the spigot of a molasses barrel?"

The crackling flight of several high speed bullets came to his ears, the glass window of Si Carkin's hardware store crumpled and fell into the street. The big wooden sign above crashed and hung swinging by one end. Men scattered back from the barricade to the safety of the corner of the saloon.

Justin Purcell loped down the street, his boot-heels hammering on the wooden sidewalk. For a man his age, he ran easily, for his body was rawhide lean. As though he ignored the improvements Samuel Colt had made on guns over the last twenty years, he held down with his right hand a worn .44 caliber cap-and-ball revolver in an equally worn open-end holster. And as though he cared as little for the changes fashion had made in men's clothes, he wore a long-skirted frock coat that swung out behind him as he ran. His trousers were tucked into well patched knee-length boots of a style hand cobbled in his youth.

"Quit trying to change me," he had yelled during the last argument with his son, David. "There's plenty of good wear left in me and in that coat, too. He had turned to include his son's wife, Judy. "And moreover, you and Judy argue till the river runs dry, but I'm wearing my cap-and-ball until I die.

"I shot that gun before you two was born. And I'm prone to be buried with it tied down to my leg." Maybe he was get-

ting a little hard-headed in his old age, he had reflected afterwards. But after wearing a gun all your life, it seemed against nature to mosey around town with an empty feeling on your right side, your hand dropping and fumbling where the good walnut grip of a gun ought to be.

HE APPROACHED the knot of men, slowing self-consciously to a stiff walk. It wouldn't do for townfolk to see a retired sheriff pounding down the street splitting the breeze with his whiskers, running like a schoolboy to watch two fyce dogs fighting behind the slaughter pens.

"Hey, Justin!" It was old Sam Cameron with his smooth-bore who saw him first. "What's been holding you up? I sent Parker's boy after you two, three hours ago. . . ."

Justin hardly listened. He was looking for his son. When he saw him, lying behind the grain sacks with his rifle ready to his hand, he felt a wave of pride that surprised him. His thin mouth broke into a smile, and he moved slightly so that he might see the star pinned to his son's shirt. A title might come to you through accident of birth, he was thinking. Clever talk might make your name resound in the chambers of law-makers. The toil of other men could bring you riches. But that star you earned yourself. Not by bluff or luck. But by skill in weapons and personal courage. He had built that into his son, molding him like a blacksmith shapes the iron on his anvil. He had been hard on this son of his, whose mother had died bearing him.

He smiled proudly, harking back to a time years before when a gawky kid had followed him, this kid to whom he had taught the trade of Frontier law. There had been times when the boy David had cried with weariness and pain during terrible rides with the old man following an endless line of hoof-prints in the drifting snow. Heat he had known, and thirst and hunger. There had been a daily routine, when the kid stood facing him, and whipped a gun from its holster and thumbed it, and drew and thumbed again and again, until the muscles of his hand had cramped.

From this soft metal, the old man reflected proudly, he had forged a man. A month ago, David had become sheriff. And as if to make the old man's happiness complete, David had married the daughter of his father's best friend, old Sam Cameron's daughter Judy.

There was a tugging at his sleeve, and Justin Purcell turned.

The man pressed his hands to his stomach . . . slipped to his knees and pitched forward on his face.

By JOHN BODRERO

"You ain't been listening." Sam Cameron's tone was accusing. "Like I was saying, they come into town about noon. Six of 'em. Held up the express office, grabbed the box, and started out of town. . . ."

Justin nodded absently. He knew how that would be. Times might change, the kind of hat a man wore, the politics he talked. But there would always be men who rode darkly into town with suspicion on their faces and armed robbery on their minds. They always came in the same manner, well mounted men, riding uneasily down the street, with sidelong glances into shadowed alleys, stopping and throwing their reins over the hitchrack. Not outside the express office, that was too obvious, with men lounging around the sparkling forge in the blacksmith shop next door, and men eating in the boarding house across the street. Then two and maybe three had clumped into the express office. In a few moments—long, long moments for those waiting outside—they had burst out. Guns flamed, cutting off the clanging of hammer on anvil, lead whined up and down and across the street, clearing the way for a run on their horses.

"Cal Sunder stepped out from his saloon," old Sam Cameron continued. "He took one with both barrels of his scattergun. Damn well knocked him clean over his horse!"

Justin nodded. There was always that bad moment of getting mounted, he mused. No matter how carefully trained, a horse always dragged back when you came running at his head. The express box would be hard to handle in the saddle. But the others wouldn't ride off. They might curse and yell, but that box would hold them together.

"When they started up the street, you could have covered 'em all under one steer hide." Sam stopped a moment for breath. "Them two little Tolliver kids run across the road right in front of the horses. One'll get well, but the youngest is dead. When the gang come to the bend in the road, they run almost head on into a band of Circle A boys ridin' in to town. The gang turned around in the middle of the road and swung back through town. Clem Trubee shot the horse out from under one of them. The fall broke his neck. The rest run down the old trail toward the river and denned up in the holding pens. All but one. He tried the river. Got about halfway across, too, before we put him under."

THERE was always something forgotten, Justin was thinking. No matter how carefully planned, how well timed, every action of man was in the end ruled by the inexorable law of coincidence. The horse gone lame, the gun that jammed, the unseen man standing in the darkened doorway. So it had been in the past, so it was today. So it would be forever.

He could see that gang pulling up with startled yells—yes, with some yells of fear, too—firing wild shots and ramming iron to their horses as they milled and turned and fled back through a town now thoroughly aroused as a jarred hornet's nest. Down to the ford and the river. And there they were trapped. Their horses might be fast, but they couldn't outrun the lead that droned out from the edge of town. So they had holed up in the only cover—the heavy log corral at river's edge—and turned their horses into the brushy draw behind it. All save one. Too crazed by fear of the guns behind, he had chosen the long, slow swim outlined against the placid surface of the river. Bullets had found him before he reached the other bank.

Justin crouched and edged over till he squatted beside his son. His expression was somber as he reached down and tapped David's shoulder. "You'd a done better to burn 'em out before they got settled there." He nodded in the direction of the log corral. "It'll cost men to take 'em now that they're ready for you."

David nodded without looking up. "I see that now. Wish I'd seen it when they first holed up. But I was shooting at the one swimming the river."

The old man was silent, his eyes searching the hundred yards of open ground that dropped gently to the log corral below. There wasn't cover for a jack-rabbit on that slope.

"You're euchered, son," he said finally. "You can't rush 'em across a hundred yards of open flat and they know it. They'll stay holed up till sundown. Then they'll fade back across the river and fog out."

David moved uncomfortably. "I been figuring if three, four men kept up a hot fire from here, they'd cover the rest of us while we busted straight down the slope."

The old man snorted. "You're the one wearin' the star, son. You can't drag a bunch of citizens with you, getting them full of holes every time you got a job to do."

He stared over the barricade, studying the course of a shallow gully that wandered zig-zag down the hill toward the river, passing within a few yards of the log pens before it broadened out into the brush-filled draw in which the outlaws had hidden their horses.

A man could sneak on his belly down that dry water-course, he was thinking. He'd come out within pistol range of the outlaws denned up in the log corral. The right man could. That was the way for a lawman to do his job. Alone, and at close quarters. Looking into the guns of the men he was going to kill. A man who did that was on his way to building up the kind of reputation a lawman should have. Killers would know him, not as a peace officer, but as a killer greater than they. He glanced calculatingly at his son.

"A man could ease down that draw, yonder," he said evenly, so that it sounded more like a command than a suggestion. "A man with guts."

He waited, watching the muscles jump under the skin of his son's jaw. He saw his son's eyes glance over to the gully and follow it reluctantly down to the log pens.

David licked his lips. "Reckon you're right," he said tensely. "I'll mosey down there."

The old man slapped him approvingly on the shoulder. "That's the kind of talk I like to hear. Minute you bust out down there shootin', I'll have every man at this end pouring lead into that corral. Wait here till I get things ready."

The old man slid back from the barricade. He felt a tingle of pride. That's how a real peace officer worked, he was thinking. Taking the chances by himself. David would get at least one of the outlaws. With a little luck, he'd cut down two of them. Covered by rifle fire from the barricade, he stood a chance to kill all three. If he could stay on his feet long enough. If he could stay on his feet and keep on shooting. Well, that was wearing the star. The old man felt a fierce glow inside him as he turned and glanced over the crowd. Today they'd see he'd raised a man.

He looked around for Sam Cameron. Sam was standing in the middle of the block, half hidden in an open doorway. His back was toward the street as Justin walked swiftly toward him. As he approached, he was aware that Sam was talking to someone standing in the doorway out of sight. Words came to Justin's ears.

"You shouldn't have come," Sam was saying haltingly.

"I had to." The answering voice was urgent as a cry. The voice of Sam Cameron's daughter, Judy. "I have to see David. I've a right to be with my husband."

Justin Purcell halted, his lips tightening with displeasure. This is no place for a wife, he thought. Especially for David's wife. The boy has work, a man's work, to do.

"There now, girl," old Sam's voice was soothing. "You run along home and wait. He ain't in no trouble."

"He will be." Judy's voice was sharpened with fear. "I saw that terrible old man racing into town a few minutes ago. Oh, Dad,"—Justin could hear her voice break—"He frightens me. He makes David reckless."

"Justin won't be proddin' him to do anything careless." Sam's voice sounded unconvincing.

"How can you say that?" Her question blazed out angrily. "You know what that old man's like. He thinks all the law there is, you can pack in the barrel of a gun. I've heard him telling David how to build up a reputation. 'The odds don't matter, son,' he says. 'Show folks that the man who wears the star can do his job alone.' "

Justin Purcell pressed back against the wall of the building. A hot anger was welling up within him. What right had this girl, to criticize the way a father raised his son? Sure, he had made David's life hard. It had to be. When a lawman drew, he burned powder, or he didn't get to draw again. You stood alone, backed up by that star on your shirt and the gun on your leg. She hadn't ought to be meddling outside her own kitchen. He heard Judy's voice going on.

"You know I wouldn't interfere, if David had to do his job alone. But when that old

man makes David take awful chances just so he can boast about how his son enforces the law single-handed. When he goads him on until someday David won't come back. . . ." Her voice broke in muffled sobbing, as though she had buried her face on her father's shoulder.

Justin Purcell felt the anger draining out of him. Why couldn't she understand that a man had to do his job alone, to build up his prestige? He stopped guiltily. Well, even if he didn't have to have prestige, exactly, a reputation for a fast draw never hurt a peace officer. And as though he ever tried to get David to do anything foolhardy just so he could boast about it. Why, she ought to be ashamed to think such a thing. He rubbed his mouth uncomfortably. He hadn't meant any harm to come to David when he'd suggested he go down the draw alone. He backed away undecidedly. Well, by golly, if she was going to cry her eyes out about it, he'd go along with David just to lend him a hand. But that wasn't admitting he was wrong about anything, he assured himself as he walked quietly back to the barricade.

He squatted down beside his son. "I been considing everything." He motioned toward the draw. "That was a foolhardy idea you got, son, going down that gully alone. They could bushwhack you down there. I'm going along with you." He smiled at the relief in his son's eyes.

"If you say so," his son said. "Be a lot more comfortable with you along."

IT WAS hot down in the gully. So hot that he'd thrown off his frock coat. But still he felt warm in the vest and checked shirt. They were getting near the log pens now, down at the river end of the gully. Justin Purcell inched along, crawing awkwardly behind David. The sun, that had broken out strong and hot, beat like fire on his back. Sweat ran from under the brim of his hat, and he raised his hand and wiped it trickling from his forehead.

They stopped, and the old man dropped his cheek wearily to the ground. Strange, he thought he had known Judy, seeing her as a little girl hiking around town in her pinafores and pig-tails. Watching her suddenly sprout up into a woman and marry his son. He thought he'd known her as well as anyone in town. And yet she called him "that terrible old man." She saw him, not as the father of her husband, but as a relentless stranger driving David to his death.

Maybe, he admitted, he'd been wrong about a lot of things. It was puzzling, how times changed without your really noticing it. In his day, every man carried his own court of law in a holster on his leg.

But out of it, slowly to be sure, he reflected, had come respect for the law. Not just fear for the gun a man carried. Not just obedience to the orders of a burying sheriff. But a healthy respect for the rights of every man.

He had been an old fool, he admitted bitterly. Living in a dead past, trying to revive the glory of days long gone. And he had forced his son into unnecessary danger. You didn't walk away from a pistol mixup with three armed men. He had goaded his son into taking too long a chance. For what? So an old man could strut up and down the street and hear folks say, "You sure raised a man, Justin."

He heard boots scuff ahead of him and looked up. His son was crawling forward again. The old man scrambled after him. He'd stop him, and send him back for four, five other men. A couple of shotguns too. A handful of chilled double-O's to rake that corral would even up the chances when they rushed it from the gully. He reached forward, his hand falling on his son's ankle.

As though his touch had set it off, a rifle roared just ahead in the draw. Lead whined off the rocks beside him. He saw the pistol jumping in his son's hand. Ahead, a man half rose from behind a bush, bent over, and dove down into the draw. The man lay still, in open sight not ten feet away, his face buried in the sand. The thing forgotten, Justin was thinking. All along they'd expected to find all three of the outlaws holed up behind the logs of the corral. But this one had been with the horses in the brush.

He shook his son's boot, and realized that David was lying very still. Too still. He inched alongside and turned him over. There was blood on his shirt, running from a bullet wound. The old man wrenched open the shirt. He tore a strip and plugged the hole under the collarbone where blood welled up.

For a moment Justin considered. He

couldn't drag his son back up the gully. Pulling at him might force the jagged end of that broken collar bone into his throat. And men couldn't come after him, not while two killers in the corral still covered the open slope. He laid David's head back on the ground, and listened to him sigh, as though regaining consciousness. For a few minutes, he'd be all right. He could lie there until the old man returned.

He slid crabwise past the outlaw lying in the sand, pausing only to make sure the man wasn't breathing anymore. Beyond him, he took off his hat and peered carefully over the edge of the draw. He saw first the log bars of the corral twenty feet away. A man crouched outside the corral, half hidden by a clump of tall grass.

He heard the shooting, Justin reflected, and he's too scared to know which way to run. As Justin threw up his revolver, the man's mouth opened and his Winchester jerked around. The hammer slipped from under Justin's thumb. The man rose to his feet, partly obscured by the white cloud of black powder smoke that drifted from the old cap-and-ball. He pressed his hands to his stomach, dropping his rifle, and walked stumbling away. Four or five steps he took, and Justin held his fire. He'd seen men walk away in that dazed, bent-over way, before. It didn't need another shot. It just needed a few seconds of time. The outlaw slid to his knees and pitched forward on his face.

Justin eased himself over the bank and crawled toward the corral. There was one more man, and he could see the crown of that man's hat at the far corner of the corral. The crown had been creased, but it was dented out now, he saw. He made out the shape lying still in the grass behind it. He reared up slowly till he was standing beside the notch-locked logs at the corner of the corral, his gun thrust forward, waist high. He's dead, he decided, knocked down by a chance shot from up the hill. And then he saw in a glance that the hat was resting on the pommel of a saddle spread on the ground.

He caught movement at his left, and twisted away, trying to get his gun around to bear on a man who rose to his knees a few feet away. Before he heard the blast of the other's gun, Justin knew he was too late. He felt his right hand struck and splinters cut into his face. The gun at his left roared again, knocking his legs out from under him. He fell, twisting away, and saw the man thumbing the hammer for another shot. But beyond the man, he caught sight of his son, running awkwardly with his left arm flopping. He was running toward them, and there was a gun in his hand. Then Justin went out.

JUSTIN felt hands on him, rolling him over. He opened his eyes. There were men crowded around, gently lifting him from the ground and sliding him into the bed of a spring wagon. There was pain in his body and one leg was numb. But there was dryness in his mouth too, and a hurt in his chest, that didn't come from gunshot wounds. Half fearful, he lifted his head and looked for his son. Then his eyes lighted. He saw David, bare from the waist up, his arm strapped across his chest, being helped into the wagon. The wagon-bed creaked and David eased up and sat down beside him. His son was grinning, and the weight seemed to lift from the old man's chest. He started to sit up, but his son pressed him back.

"Take it easy, Dad," he said. "You've got a busted leg. And the hide tore off one thumb." He reached down and picked up a boot with the leg slit from top to vamp. "Had to cut your boot off you," he explained. He held up the old man's cap-and-ball revolver. "And that ain't all. Take a look at this. The first bullet that outlaw fanned at you, jammed the cylinder and cracked the frame."

The old man was about to answer when the spring wagon jerked forward. He dropped his head back, cushioned on his hat. Suddenly he felt tired and very old. Well, he thought, I'll have to buy me a new pair of boots. Them fancy topped ones would please Judy. And his cap-and-ball? What if it was busted? He'd hang it up over the fireplace. It didn't look sensible anyway for an old galoot to go rannyin' around town with a gun thonged down to his leg. He closed his eyes. Yes, he thought dreamily, from now on he'd have to show Judy he wasn't really a terrible old man. Just a tired old man, sitting around town, watching the new way grow up.

"CALL ME SMITH!"

By A. B. MacKENZIE

HE WAS an inoffensive looking little cuss, the day he ran afoul of big Ken Thompson in the Poker Deck Saloon deep in Vernon River County. Larry Laughlin had seen him in the barber shop, waiting his turn to be trimmed up, and had noticed the blue jeans, worn from riding, the tanned, leathery skin that told of a lifetime out in the weather, and the rather diffident blue eys. It was after his turn in the barber's chair that he'd wandered into the Pocker Deck, and lined up at the bar, right next to Ken Thompson, who was just getting well started on a week-end spree. Thompson, ugly drunk already, had turned suddenly, and spilled his drink as he bumped the little fellow's shoulders.

"Why don't you watch what you're doin'?" he growled at the little man.

The little gent didn't shrink, exactly, but he drew back from Thompson as if he were expecting the big man to hit him, and, of course, to anyone like Ken Thompson, that was an invitation. He stuck out a ham-like hand to the smaller man's vest and drew him up on his toes.

"Say ye're sorry!" he demanded.

"I'm sorry!" said the little man, promptly.

Ken Thompson's face darkened. For a moment the quick backdown puzzled him. "Yellow as hell!" he sneered.

The little man didn't say anything.

"Ain't you?" demanded Thompson, scowling.

The little fellow didn't answer that, either. Somebody laughed right behind Thompson, and that made Thompsoon even more inclined to make something of it. He took his glass, still half full of whiskey, and tossed it into the little man's face. Then he followed it with a ringing slap.

That was enough for Larry Laughlin. He elbowed his way through the crowd, and confronted Thompson.

"Found somebody who won't fight?" he demanded.

Thompson looked up. "What's it to you?" he scowled. His hand left the little jigger's shoulder, and slowly came to rest on his belt. Larry noticed that the little man didn't move, nor take his eyes off Thompson's face.

"The man ain't wearin' no guns," Larry said slowly. "Maybe that's why you can afford to play rough. Now me," he added slowly, "I got guns!"

Thompson took a step back, and Larry heard the sound of people crowding out of the way behind him. But there wasn't any chance for gunplay, for the little man followed Thompson.

"I guess it's sorta my fault," he said. His voice was just about as colorless as his appearance. "I got in the way, and I apologized. There's no need for anything else. Thanks though, mister." He never took his eyes off Thompson' s face.

"I don't want any trouble, and I sure don't want anybody to have trouble on account of me. So, the best thing I can do is to get away so there'll be no trouble."

Some men swagger, some men roll, some men walk as if a band was playing. You couldn't describe how the little guy walked as he turned on his heel and went out of the Poker Deck; he just went. Larry Laughlin took a final glare at Ken Thompson, and got a glare back, then he followed the little fellow to the street. He found him at the hitching rack, sorting out his reins. The little guy looked up and nodded; he didn't speak.

Larry was puzzled. After a business like that back in the saloon, the average man would be embarrassed—at least he'd feel some comment was called for. Because the little man didn't consider any comment necessary, Larry didn't know just how to open the conversation.

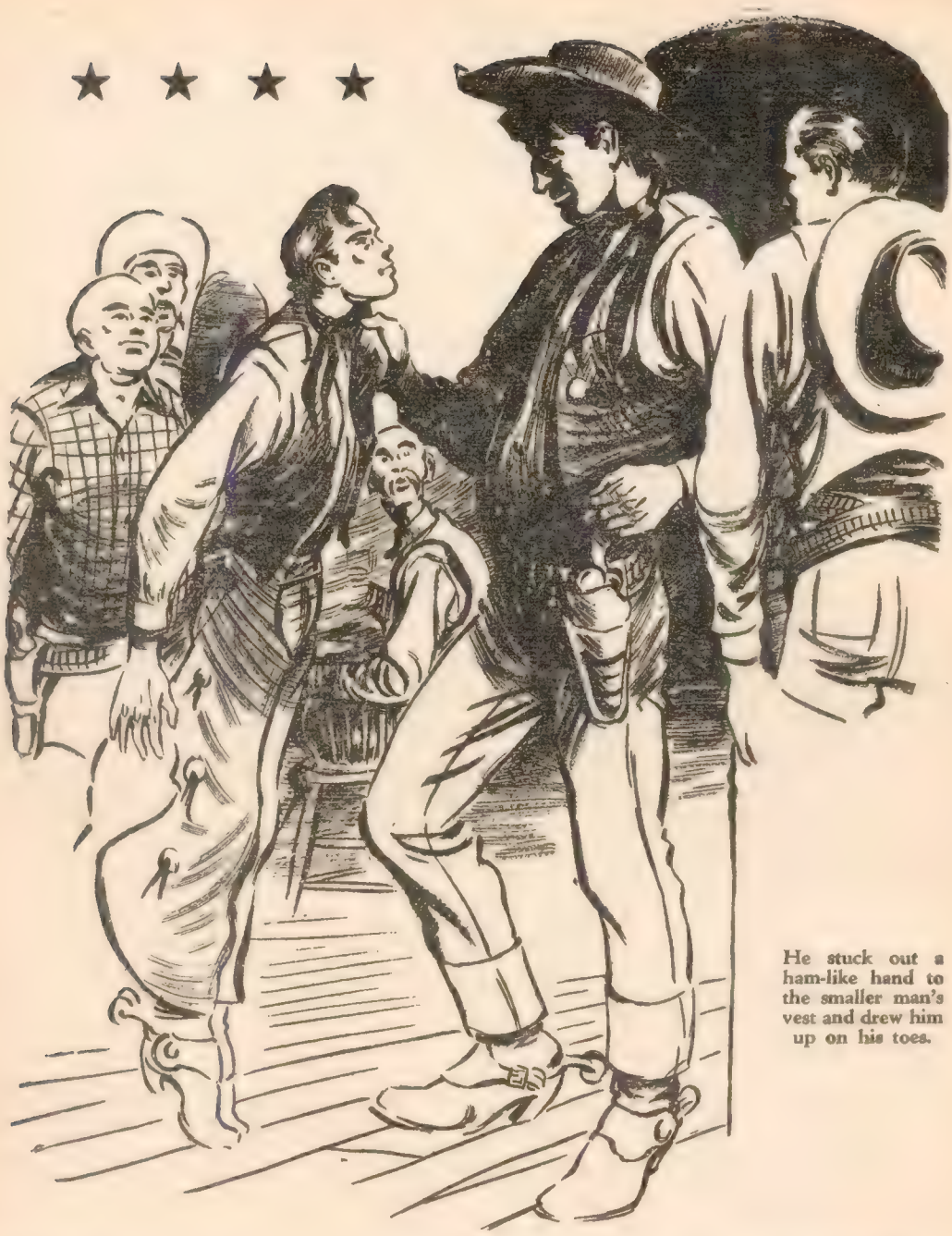
He said, tentatively, "Lookin' fer a job, feller?"

The other nodded.

"Got a gun?" Larry asked.

"That's pretty obvious," said the little man. "If I had, I would have shot that

Like dynamite, the mild little runt called Smith might take a power of punishment. . . . Then, brother, it was time to run fast and far!



He stuck out a ham-like hand to the smaller man's vest and drew him up on his toes.

fellow back in there. I don't carry them, and I don't use them."

"I need a man who'll use a gun," Larry said.

"Then what you talkin' to me for?"

Larry was a little taken aback by the man's frankness, "Guess I don't know, at that," he admitted. "You a good cowman?"

"Yes," he said. "Name's Smith."

That's the way Smith got to be a part of the Circle Dot outfit, and he was the only one in that tough bunch who didn't lug around a couple of guns. Not that it made any difference to the other fellows.

THERE was trouble brewing in that part of the country, and it was brewing between Larry Laughlin and Ken Thompson. Larry had been painfully building up a herd, and Thompson had come into the country later. Starting with a little herd, he was building it up with great speed. It seemed that the speed was contributed to by a wide loop that was swung by his whole outfit, the Diamond K. Larry Laughlin wasn't the man to go looking for trouble, but it had got to the stage where he didn't intend to miss any opportunities to present Thompson in a bad light; or to catch him with his rope around a neighbor's calf. That meant trouble, because Ken Thompson loved trouble. He even looked for it.

Larry explained all this to Smith on the way out to the ranch, and Smith calmly accepted the stiuation. His only comment was: "Hope there's no shootin'," he said, "cause if there is it'll probably be at me."

Though Larry told him that he didn't need to take the job if he didn't want it, Smith only shrugged. During the next few weeks, he became almost popular in the Circle Dot organization; always around and never shooting his mouth off, doing his job and asking no favors. He was particularly well liked by Larry's young wife, who considered him nice. Privately she was a little afraid of the tougher hombres around the ranch, for Larry had chosen his men with an eye cocked for trouble from across the range. Smith, with his gunless belt, seemed a little less lethal.

Stella, when she could arrange it, rode out with Smith when he was working out from the ranch, and Smith quietly welcomed her company, though he never said much on the way. That went on for some time, and Larry was glad enough that Stella had something to occupy her mind, until the day the Diamond K boys caught Smith out on the range alone. There were three of them, and they roughed the little man up, and sent him back to the Circle Dot, beaten and bleeding, tied backward on his pony. The boys at the Circle Dot were pretty sore about the whole thing.

"No sense in doin' anything about it," he said, through swollen lips. "I wouldn't do anything about it, so why should you. If you go helling over to their side, there'll be shooting, and people getting killed. Silly!"

It was funny, those tough riders on the outfit didn't seem to think a bit less of Smith because he'd been beaten up. Maybe it was because he didn't seem to be ashamed of it, or to bear any malice. But after that they generally arranged to be around handy whenever Smith was working near the Diamond K range. One thing the affair did do, though, it put an end to the rides that Stella had been taking with Smith.

"He can't look after himself, honey," he told Stella, "an' that means he can't look after you. If you want to go ridin', from now on you ride with Red or Pete. Nobody's goin' to run any sandys on them!"

If Smith felt any disappointment when Stella no longer looked for his company when she rode out, he gave no sign of it. His self-possession seemed proof against any opinion that anyone held.

Things went on that way for a couple of weeks, and then Smith brought in the body of Pete Murdoch.

"Found him in the hills, in a little wash," he told Larry, in his dry, colorless voice. "There was signs of a branding fire there, near where Pete was. I reckon he ran into a party running a brand on a calf. If we could locate the calf, I'll bet it'd be a Diamond K calf with a Circle Dot old lady."

Larry swore. "Now, will you wear a gun?" he said, bitterly. "You'll be runnin' into somethin' like that, and then where will you be?"

"Dead, like Pete," Smith said, succinctly.

Larry sighed and turned brooding eyes over toward the Diamond K range. "Not much use goin' over there, unless we go over to wipe that bunch out," he said.

The boys were ready to go, too, but there was no proof that a rider from the other side of the range was responsible for the murder. But after that they went in pairs about their jobs, and they reported that the Diamond K riders were doing the same. Larry dug out a pair of pistols in a belt, and gave them to Smith, with instructions to wear them.

"Nothing doing," Smith told him. "I told you I wasn't a gun-slinger when you hired me. I don't aim ever to shoot a man, even to keep a job! Do you want me to quit, boss?"

Larry swore and turned on his heel. Smith took the belt and hung it in the bunkhouse.

But things were ripe for open, bloody war, and it wasn't long coming. Eventually the day arrived when a couple of Circle Dot riders got the drop on two Diamond K boys running a brand on a Circle Dot calf. Late in the afternoon they herded the riders, the cow and the calf, back into the Circle Dot corrals, and called Larry to come out and have a look. Larry was grim.

"Well, fellers, there's toruble now for sure," he said to the quiet circle of riders that grouped about him. "It's time now to put up or shut up, and I ain't aiming to check no bets from now on."

THE group about him nodded agreement. Red Stevens hitched his guns around. "I reckon, boss, it's about time we went over there and smoked that bunch out, pronto."

"That's right," said Larry. "But we gotta do it legal—as legal as we can. Smith, you're the one whose not goin' to be needed around here, an' it'll get you out of the way. You get in to town as quick as God'll let you, and get back here with the sheriff. There's no need to wait for a posse, there's enough of us here. And the rest of you stay close to the ranch until Smith and the sheriff get back."

The little man nodded, and was on his way without a word. Dusk was almost due when the whip of a bullet, followed by the crack of a rifle, startled him. He pulled up his horse and fell to the ground, rolling for the scant cover afforded by sagebrush. His keen eyes searched for the ambush, but there was no sign, nor were the shots repeated. He lay in the sage for a half hour, watching, and finally he saw a man rise out of the brush. The man watched for a long while, then disappeared. A couple of minutes later, two horsemen appeared and rode rapidly away.

Cold sweat broke out on Smith's forehead. There wasn't time to get the sheriff. Those riders were Diamond K men, and they had dusted out for the Circle Dot like men who had no time to waste. Smith didn't know what to do. It was still four hours to town, two hours back to the Circle Dot. But he made up his mind even as he swung into the saddle. He had to get back to the ranch and let the boss know to expect trouble he'd have to handle himself, sheriff or no sheriff.

Moonight was just beginning to steal over the range when Smith worked his horse cautiously into the Circle Dot yard. Everything was quiet. He left the reins hanging, and had time to take just two steps toward the house when the butt of a gun descended savagely on his head, and he went out like a light.

When he was able to open his eyes again, he was in the ranch house, and nobody was paying any attention to him. In the lamp light he could see the broad shoulders of Ken Thompson. The Diamond K had beaten him to the ranch. Smith heaved himself up on an elbow, and groaned. Thompson swung around to look at him, and grinned savagely.

"Yo're a hard little weasel to kill," he said. "I thought we'd accounted for you twice't at least"

"Did you get him?" The question came from Larry, who was sitting, unarmed, before Thompson.

Smith focused aching eyes on Laughlin; shook his head, miserably. Laughlin shot a worried glance at his wife, but Stella's expression didn't change a bit. Her heart must have just about dropped out of her, but for all she showed, Smith might have reported that he'd failed to find a critter he'd been looking for.

There were two of the Diamond K riders in the room, too, and their attention was strained on Larry Laughlin.

"Well, Laughlin," said Thompson, with a sneer that showed his white teeth, "I guess that now the excitement's over, you an' me can talk a little business. I came over here to buy you out. This is just a business call."

"I'm not doin' no business with you, Thompson," Larry said. "The best business you can do is to get out of here, damn you!"

"Now, that's no way for a man to talk to a customer, sure! I'm a customer, an' I'm offering you five hundred dollars for your ranch, buildings and stock!"

Laughlin looked at the man for a minute, and laughed mirthlessly. "Think I'm crazy?" he demanded.

Thompson grinned wolfishly. "No, I don't. I'm the crazy one, offerin' you five hundred dollars just to save a little trouble! If you don't sell out, Laughlin, we're goin' to shoot every man on the place!"

Larry stared at the man. He licked his lips. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" Thompson shrugged. "Just you try not signin' a bill of sale, and you'll see!"

"You can't get away with it!"

"Can't I though. Dump a few bodies around the range to make it look like we fought it out fair and square. The only stories to be told will be the stories we tell!"

Larry was silent for a minute. Then his shoulders sagged. "You win," he said. "I'll sell!"

THE two Diamond K men put their hands on their guns, and Larry leaned forward in his chair, but no one remembered Smith. He was off the couch like a wildcat, and had slugged Thompson twice in the face before Thompson could get a hold on his shirt.

"So," Thompson said, "you've applied for that beatin' you didn't get in town. He smashed the little man five times on the eyes, nose and mouth. The Diamond K men held their guns on Larry and Stella.

Finally Smith sagged in Thompson's hands. Thompson dragged the limp body to the door, and shoved Smith through it.

"Will I?" said one of the men, gesturing significantly with his gun.

"Nah," said Thompson. "We'll be away from here before he wakes up!"

The document transferring the Circle Dot, lock, stock and barrel to the Diamond K was being signed by Larry, when a hard voice came from the door.

"Get 'em up!"

There at the door was the little man! His face was bloody, his shirt torn, his eyes half shut—but the two guns were unwavering. He stepped inside.

"Get their guns, boss!"

Larry collected the available hardware.

Smith holstered his guns. "Now, boss, since I got these guns you gave me, I figure on using them. We don't need to worry about interruptions, because I heard the Diamond K boys talkin' as I sneaked into the bunkhouse. They got orders to stay away from here."

Smith walked up to Thompson. He pulled out a gun and leveled it at Thompson's middle. Thompson winced!

Smith sneered. "It's not so good when the spur's on another man's boot, is it?"

He motioned to Larry. "Put his guns back in his holsters, Boss, will you please?"

"Smith, what's the idea?"

Smith gestured imperiously with the gun. "Do as I say Boss, or I'll let him have it without no guns!"

Slowly Larry slid Thompson's weapons into their places, and a grim look of satisfaction began to appear on Thompson's face.

"Goin' to shoot it out with me?"

"Yes, I figure," replied Smith, calmly.

Thompson grinned.

Smith went on. "I reckon you don't know me, Thompson. But did you ever hear tell of Angel Smith?"

Larry gasped. "Angel Smith, the gunman? He's dead!"

Smith backed away. "Not yet, he isn't," he said.

Thompson was crouched a little; beads of sweat were appearing on his forehead.

"I quit carrying a gun a long time ago, Thompson, so I'm out of practice. I swore I'd never kill another man."

Thompson blinked.

"You beat the hell out of me tonight, Thompson, and I've had a crack over the head that leaves me hardly able to see, Thompson, but I still figure I'm faster than you are!"

Slowly Smith holstered his gun, and slowly he raised his hands until they were at the same level that Thompson held his.

"I've had a yearnin' to kill you, Thompson, ever since that first day in the Poker Deck."

Thompson was still, sweating in rivulets, with the death fear in his eyes.

"Hell," said Smith. "I thought you'd take a break. I can't give you no more. Guess I'll have to shoot you like a dog."

Thompson's hands flashed, clutching, but the gun muzzles never cleared the holsters. Two shots rang out, and Thompson buckled at the knees, clutching his chest. Smith leaned forward, the smoke curling from his guns, a curious expression on his face. He watched Thompson fall. Nobody moved.

Finally Smith sighed. "Now, boss, there's some clearing up to do down at the corral. I reckon there'll be much trouble. I hope not! After that, boss, you're getting your guns back—for keeps!"

HELL COULDN'T CATCH THEM

By
ROY VANDERGOOT

Brother Hubbell, of the Missouri Steamboat and Transportation Company, was a man to tie up with. Or was he?

"BUT you promised us you'd get us out," the husky young miner protested to John Hubbell. He swung around to look at the group of fellow-miners gathered in the office of Hawley and Hubbell, agents for the Missouri Steamboat and Transportation Company at Fort Benton, in Montana. The month was October and the year 1866.

"Didn't he?" the young fellow said, appealing again to the gang of men.

They all agreed with him, including Hubbell himself. "And I *will* get you out," Hubbell stated.

"But how? This is already the twentieth of the month and that blasted steamboat hasn't come up yet. And what's more, she won't—and you know it!"

Hubbell nodded. "Reckon you're right, partner. But I'll get out," he reiterated. "Come back tomorrow morning, ready to travel."

Muttering and shaking their heads, the miners tramped out of the office. Having made their stake in the gambler-ridden, tough Alder Gulch diggings during the summer and fall, they wanted to get out to spend the winter back East, in the cities that were gay during a season when the mining towns were utterly dreary. And now it looked as if they would be frozen in, by God! That damn steamboat wouldn't come up anymore now. Not now, with the chance of the old Muddy freezing solid any old day—or night—while you happened to be looking sideways for a minute.

The next morning they showed up at Hubbell's office, skeptical and cantankerous. But Hubbell was ready for them. He had chartered a mackinaw boat, eighty feet long by twelve feet wide and for fifty feet of her length housed with logs that made her bullet and arrow-proof.

The miners admitted that the thing might do the trick as far as Fort Union, where Hubbell expected the steamboat to be waiting for them. She was quite safe as far as Indian attacks were concerned, as long as she kept floating down the Missouri. But, if the river should ice over! . . .

"You got to take a chance," Hubbell pointed out. "I am taking one. You want to get out, don't you?"

They did—the worst way!

So down the Missouri they went.

Finally they arrived at Fort Union where they had expected to catch the steamboat. *Had* was right—the boat had come that far, waited one day, and then had turned back.

There was no help for it now; it was either work like hell and take a still longer chance, or otherwise spend the winter at God-forsaken Fort Union. They chose the work and the long chance. Manning the oars, they fell to with a will.

When on November twenty-six they arrived in Sioux City, the river was full of ice. The next morning she lay solid.

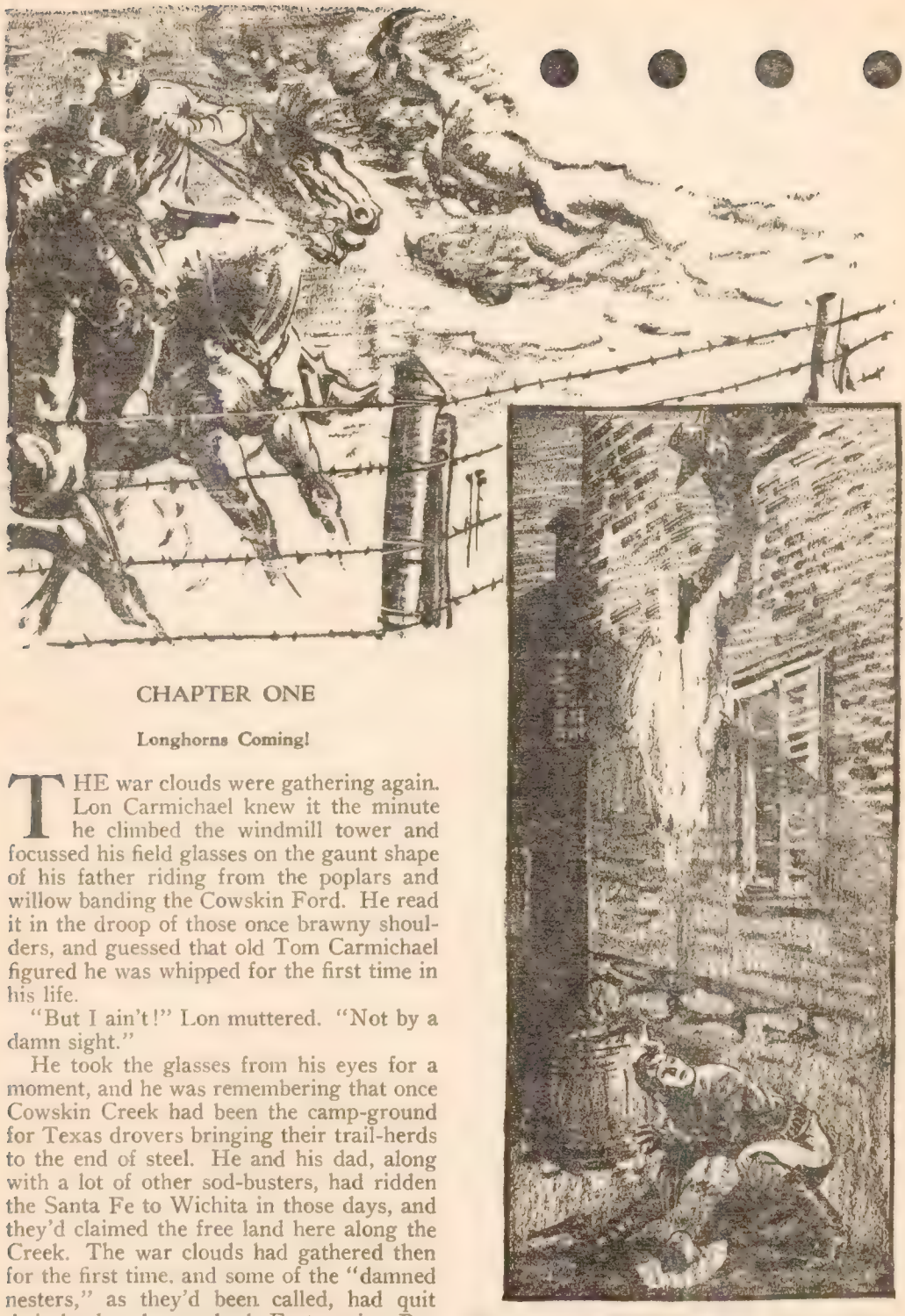
Hubbell? Oh, yes; he spent the winter in the East. He could afford it, for hadn't he collected $175 fare from each passenger?

WICHITA'S BARBWIRE WAR

Saga of Four Boot-Tough Hombres Who Tallied Themselves as Kings of Hell

By M. HOWARD LANE

Whiskey-King Pryor planned red, raw rotgut delirium and destruction for a city. Newspaper-King Gillin's hate hymns pounded from his presses to inflame a thousand minds; Gun-King Scar Brady's killer legionnaires would rod a kingdom of the damned! And only five thin strands of barbwire and a single beaten, bloody sod-buster stood between this Devil's combine and a peaceful cow-town of Wichita.



The man said, "Ah!" and fired straight down.

CHAPTER ONE

Longhorns Coming!

THE war clouds were gathering again. Lon Carmichael knew it the minute he climbed the windmill tower and focussed his field glasses on the gaunt shape of his father riding from the poplars and willow banding the Cowskin Ford. He read it in the droop of those once brawny shoulders, and guessed that old Tom Carmichael figured he was whipped for the first time in his life.

"But I ain't!" Lon muttered. "Not by a damn sight."

He took the glasses from his eyes for a moment, and he was remembering that once Cowskin Creek had been the camp-ground for Texas drovers bringing their trail-herds to the end of steel. He and his dad, along with a lot of other sod-busters, had ridden the Santa Fe to Wichita in those days, and they'd claimed the free land here along the Creek. The war clouds had gathered then for the first time, and some of the "damned nesters," as they'd been called, had quit their land and gone back East again. But a few had stuck, taking all the abuse mer-

chant and Texan alike could hand them. One of those families had been the Carmichaels of Cowskin Creek.

They had stuck while the rails rushed on to Ellsworth and Abilene, and Dodge and they had smiled to themselves when the merchants in Wichita had started to cater to the sod-bust trade, once the cattlemen were gone.

So for a time there had been peace, but now the war clouds were gathering again. They'd been rising like thunder-heads over the horizon for the last six months. Ever since *The Register,* Wichita's only newspaper, had started printing full-page advertisements, inviting Texas cattlemen to return to Wichita. Pete Gillin's paper was doing its best to convince the Texans that Wichita had always been the true terminus of the Chisholm.

So those herds might be coming again to the Cowskin Ford—only now there were five strands of shining steel wire barring cattle from the crossing! Wire that was going to stay there, according to the beaten look of old Tom Carmichael, for evidently his mission had been unsuccessful.

"Damn King Kalan straight to hell!" Lon muttered, and he lifted the glasses again and stared long and grimly at Cowskin Ford, as though by sheer willpower he could penetrate the screen of trees and peer through the walls of King Kalan's soddy, and into the mind of the man himself. But he knew he was wasting his time. No one could figure King Kalan's reason for throwing a fence across the Chisholm.

The man had come to Wichita just about six months ago, Lon remembered. He had stepped from a Santa Fe train, and he hadn't looked or acted like a farmer, but he had hired a buggy and ridden all along the Creek, and when he had learned the location of Jim Brown's homestead, just across Cowskin Ford, he had offered that farmer a price for his land that couldn't be refused. And within another thirty days he'd added two other adjacent farms to his original purchase, and started hiring neighborhood help to work the land. He'd paid good wages in hard money, which was scarce, and so had Cowskin men bidding for the chance to do his farming.

Lon remembered, with his ears burning a little, that he had been just as eager as the rest of them to pick up a shiny silver dollar for a day's work. He had stayed with it, too, until King Kalan had brought in a foreman from Wichita. Scar Brady was the man's name, and Lon had never seen him without a pair of low-slung Colts at his hips. Damned funny gear for a farm foreman to be wearing! That was what he'd told the others, but they hadn't cared much as long as Kalan's money held out. And then the barbwire had arrived. A wagon load of it.

Scar Brady had set his crew of Cowskin men to cutting willow posts from the thickets in the creek bottom, and Lon remembered that he had been the only one to protest.

"They'll rot fast as you set 'em in the ground," he'd objected.

And Brady had said, "Mister, you ain't hired to think. Jest keep that axe swingin'—"

That night Lon Carmichael had drawn his time. King Kalan had paid him off in bright silver, and his hands were white and smooth, and his face was soft—a mighty funny sod-buster! Most of the day-time he spent sleeping, but usually at night they could hear his buckboard on the Cowskin road, rattling toward Wichita.

That wire had arrived two months ago, Lon judged, and since then the fencing had progressed rapidly. It had been all completed, save for that wide strip the hoofs of Texas cattle had carved into the prairie—the Chisholm Trail. No man, as far as Lon knew, had ever considered throwing a fence across it. But that was just what King Kalan had done!

LON recalled the evening that young Billie Ford, whose folks were up-creek neighbors, had stopped off on his way home to bring them the news. The boy had been excited, and even if he was just an overgrown kid of sixteen, he could see what the fencing might mean.

"Five strands of wire he made us string across the Trail," Billie told them. "Put a drop gate in the middle for hossman to get through, but if airy drover ever tries to bring another herd to Wichita his steers will just pile up ag'in that wire and slash themselves to death. Every last one of us fellers quit him, but that ain't goin' to help much."

It wouldn't help the Cowskin farmers a

bit, Lon thought, for he was old enough to remember what had happened before when the herds were coming to Wichita. A few farmers had tried to fence their land then, and those Texans had torn down the wire, tromped their fields, and burned them out. They'd do worse this time if King Kalan kept that fence across the Trail. They'd take it out on all the Cowskin sod-busters, ruin the farms they'd spent years in building.

The Farmer's League had held an indignation meeting, and about all that had been accomplished was to delegate their president, Old Tom, to ride down and have a talk with Kalan. There was another meeting scheduled tonight at the Ford's soddy to hear his report. But Lon knew right now what his dad would have to tell them.

Tom Carmichael turned Trotter in from the Cowskin road. He rode at a walk, the reins loose along the brown's neck, and he was a beaten man.

Lon met him in the yard, and crowsfeet thickened about his level grey eyes as he stared at his father.

"So Kalen won't change that fence?" he said flatly.

Old Tom took off his battered hat, and ran aimless fingers through his gray hair. "No," he said tiredly. "I talked for an hour, tried to make him see what it would mean to all of us if he kept that wire across the Trail. But he wouldn't budge. Claims the land is his, bought and paid for fair and square, and he can do any damned thing he wants with it. Says if any Texans come this way again, they can drive around his fence and make a new crossing for themselves."

"South of his line fence there's quicksand bogs," Lon said bitterly, "and up this way our land borders the creek. They make a crossing here, and we're out of business. . . ." His eye passed out over waving fields of half-grown corn and grain.

"I hate to tell the folks what I've learned," Old Tom mumbled. "Seems like there'd oughta be somethin' I could have said, but I guess I jest got all flustered with that new crew of his settin' around and laughing at me behind their hands."

Lon Carmichael's gaze came back to his father. "New crew?" he asked.

Old Tom nodded. "Six tough hands from Wichita. Ever one of 'em with a gun on his hip. Saloon sweepings, if you ask me. I misdoubt if airy of 'em could even harness a team!"

Lon looked at his work-toughened hands, and he thought of Billie Ford's sister, Eileen. He'd counted on seeing her tonight at the meeting. Dancing with her afterward, if things had turned out different. But there'd be no music tonight. No heel-n-toe to make a man forget the weariness of the work-day. Instead there'd be fear in the Ford house, and endless talk, and the grim farmer hope that Wichita might fail in her efforts to bring back Texas herds to this once great terminus of the Chisholm.

The crackle of hoofs out on the Cowskin road roused Lon from his bitter contemplation. Squinting through the westering light, he recognized the rider turning into their side road. It was young Billie Ford.

"He's been to Wichita," Tom Carmichael guessed, "and he's all het up. Wonder what we're up against now?"

Billie Ford reached into the saddle-bag behind his saddle, and handed them down a copy of *The Register*. He didn't speak. There was no need. The glaring banner headline filling half the first page spoke for him.

TEXAS JACK MARTIN BRINGING TWO THOUSAND LONGHORNS TO WICHITA!

CHAPTER TWO

Wichita Raid

TEXAS JACK MARTIN stood six-foot-four with his boots off. He was axe-handle broad, with a voice that could outthunder a stampede, and a temper touchy as a hair-triggered sixgun. When he saw that barbwire across Cowskin Ford there'd be red hell to pay all along the creek.

The story following that headline told in glowing terms what the re-opening of the Chisholm would mean to Wichita, but it swam before Lon's eyes, all except a few lines near the end.

According to the letter received from Texas Jack, his trail-herd has been on the road for better than two months now, so barring bad weather along the trail it will reach Wichita about the time that old King of the Chisholm catches up with his crew.

A week, possibly even days, might see the bannering dust of the JM herd rise over the southern horizon. Billie Ford and Old Tom had evidently been thinking the same thing.

"Mebbe we better get the boys together," Billie said hoarsely, "and sneak down and cut Kalan's fences."

"With six tough gunnies riding line?" Lon said abstractedly. "You'd be shot to doll-rags. That's why he probably hired 'em, just to keep us from doing something like that."

A buckboard smoked out of the poplars down at Cowskin Ford, and came racing along the road behind a pair of high-stepping bays. Two men were on the seat. Lon recognized them as they approached. Scar Brady, in the flashy gear of a cowboy dandy, was handling the reins. On the seat beside him rode King Kalan. The man was wearing a fine gray suit and white Stetson. Not overly tall, he made up in broadness for what he lacked in height. Arrogance mantled him like a cloak, and as they passed the side-road, Lon watched Kalan raise one hand to them in mocking salute. The dust from their passing filtered in like fog.

Lon stared after them a long time, and then he reached for Trotter's reins.

"Son," old Tom sounded startled, "what are you aimin' to do?"

Lon swung into the brown's saddle, and his face was set stubbornly. "Follow them," he said flatly. "There's a lot of folks in Wichita who ain't going to be any happier about the news in *The Register* than us. Merchants and bankers and lawyers. They have wives and kids they want to educate in a law-abiding town. Those folks won't forget the way things used to be. Warn't a man but Wyatt Earp who could ever keep the law in Wichita. So you can bet your bottom dollar they ain't the men who started paying for those ads that turned Texas Jack Martin up this branch of the Chisholm.

"Take a look at this," he twisted the paper savagely, and the back page was a single advertisement, extolling the advantages of Wichita over Dodge. "The gent who concocts this hog-wash," Lon said grimly, "is a heap sight smarter than Pete Gillin."

"I met Parson Benson while I was in town," Billie Ford broke in, "and he's mighty worried. Claims he had a talk with Gillin, trying to make him see that the good, solid folks in Wichita want to build the town's future on farm and ranch money, but Gillin laughed at him. He wouldn't even name the gents payin' for these ads. He said there warn't no law ag'in runnin' 'em—"

"There ain't," Lon said, and then his voice took fire, "but by Heaven there is a law against destroying property, and killing innocent men and women. And that's what it'll mean to us if Texas Jack Martin turns his crew loose along the Creek. "Dad," he ended abruptly, "you and Billie head on over to the Fords. Mebbe I'll be back in time to give your meeting somethin' to chaw on!"

"What can you do in town that ain't already been done?" old Tom asked.

"I can have a talk with Pete Gillin," Lon told them, "and mebbe my argyments will be more persuasive than a preacher's!"

THE ghosts of old Wichita were coming alive in the dusk. Lon Carmichael could sense excitement in the town the moment he crossed the Arkansas River tollbridge at the West end of Douglas Avenue. Ahead of him, he could see knots of men talking and flourishing papers.

Disjointed bits of excited conversation came to him as he rode slowly along the street. "Bring those cussed cowboys back to town and a body won't be safe on the streets after dark," one man remarked. Another said, "Won't anybody benefit by it save the saloons and gamblers. They made the money the fust time, and the rest of us suffered. . . ." A third said as hotly, "Everybody will profit by the new money coming to town. All we're doing now is livin' off each other. . . ."

A fourth man had joined the group. Lon, idling within hearing distance, saw the glint of gold on the lapel of the other's vest, and he recognized the square-shouldered shape of Sam Masters, Wichita's young deputy marshal.

He heard Masters say in his cool, slow way, "We live off the farmers and ranchers hereabouts. They're makin' more money each year, and spending it right here in Wichita. But they won't have it long if Texas trailhands start hoorawin' them again—"

Lon passed on, and there was suddenly

a little warmth in his frozen middle. It sounded like the Cowskin sod-busters had one friend anyway!

The rest of the talk he had heard turned his thoughts into a new channel. The man who had mentioned saloon-keepers and gamblers as the beneficiaries of trail-pay had been about right, for some of the more garish saloons had spent money in furnishings they could not afford to lose. Those places had stayed open when the rails had moved to Abilene, and these last years had probably seemed like a depression to them with nothing but town trade to draw on for their bounty.

"So mebbe," Lon muttered, "some of them got together on the sly and put up the dinero for those ads."

But that still couldn't account for King Kalan buying Jim Brown's place and fencing in the Chisholm.

Lon was nearing the intersection of Main Street and Douglass, and the lights of the Keno House on the corner were already bright. Kent Pryor owned the saloon, and there were none who refuted his claim to being "the best damned gambler in Wichita." His was the finest establishment of its kind in the town, and it had been the mecca for cattle barons and their foremen in the old days. Lon watched a tall, white sombrero make its way through the early-evening crowd at the corner, and disappear inside. King Kalan was wearing that hat.

"Ain't no law against him buyin' a drink," Lon thought bitterly. In fact no law had yet been broken, but the farmers down along Cowskin Creek were going to suffer just the same when Texas Jack Martin got here!

A block ahead, Lon saw light behind the windows of *The Register* which was located in one of the few two-story structures in Wichita. The pressroom was on the ground floor, the offices up-stairs. Lon tied Trotter at the hitch-rail in front of the building, and an anger was starting to burn in him that he knew he had to control. Only a man with a clear head would stand a chance against the ruthless forces at work here in Wichita.

He pushed through the door and entered. A railing with desks behind it and a Washington press filled most of the room, and a forlorn old janitor was cleaning the crumpled papers and debris from the floor.

"Mister Gillin's gone home," he said hastily as Lon closed the door behind him.

Lon looked at him and grinned. "Then he must have forgotten to turn off the lamp in his office," he said ironically.

He took the steps that led to the second story two at a time, and his hands brushed empty hips. There was a holstered Colt at home that he wished he'd worn to town, but a farmer's weapons were not guns. Lon looked at his chapped knuckles and the smile was still on his lips. They should be enough to persuade Gillin to answer a few questions.

The door of the office was ajar. Lon opened it and stepped inside. Pete Gillin was seated behind a table that served for his desk. Papers littered it. He did not raise his eyes at Lon's entrance.

"Put those proofs on the hook, Mike," he said.

"Only this ain't Mike!" Lon said gently.

Gillin's head came up with a jerk. His face was pasty from indoor work, round and flabby. He peered at Lon Carmichael out of eyes black as the ink he used to print *The Register*.

"What do yau want, nester?" he asked huskily.

"The name of the gent who buys space for those Texas ads."

"You'll not get it," Pete Gillin said, and he reached for a mallet on the corner of his desk.

"I think I will," Lon said softly and he stepped to the side of Gillin's desk and laid his hand on the heavy maul.

But the paunchy editor was quicker and stronger than he'd suspected. The mallet jerked from beneath his hand and swung down quickly. All the fingers on Lon's right hand turned numb, and the pain reached clear to his shoulder. The anger he'd been trying to control exploded like sheet lightning in his brain, and he stepped close and caught Gillin with a swinging left that sent the man spinning from his chair. Gillin's fall shook the floor.

"Damned sod-buster!" he cried, and Lon saw the hand whip inside his vest. A stubby derringer came from a shoulder holster, and Lon kicked it out of the man's hand and dropped on top of him. His right hand was still useless, but there was nothing wrong with the left. He slugged Gillin's soft face.

"You'll talk, mister," he gritted, "or I'll beat the life out of you. Who in the great living hell is behind this scheme to ruin us?"

Lon had no warning that anyone had even entered the room until a shadow fell across him, and then it was too late. Frantically he tried to turn, but the effort was wasted. He felt the slash of a gun-barrel across his ear, and the second strike that seemed to lift him high in the air, and then plunge him down into a black well that had no bottom.

CHAPTER THREE

Sod-buster Heading for Hell

WHEN he awoke, it felt for a minute or two like his head didn't belong to him. He seemed to be in a spinning room-full of bars and light, and then the dizziness left him and the room settled into stillness. He was lying on a lumpy straw tick, and as he turned his head chains rattled, and the cot swayed a little. Lon blinked. The bars and the light he'd imagined were real. The door was made of iron rods, and there was a single lantern hanging on the corridor wall opposite.

"Son," Lon spoke the words aloud, and his tongue felt furry, "you're in the calaboose. Damned if you ain't!"

He swung his feet to the floor, and sat up, holding his head. Someone had been thoughtful enough to wrap a crude bandage around it, and near the door he saw a water pail and dipper. Staggering a little, he got to it and drank thirstily, then poured the remainder of the dipper over his throbbing head.

He was feeling a little better by the time he reached the cot again, and a part, at least, of what had happened came back to him. He'd set out in the late afternoon for Wichita to try and learn something that might make King Kalen change his tune, and he'd ended up in a fight with Pete Gillin. Everything had been going fine until the roof dropped in.

"Someone did a mighty good job of buffaloing me," Lon muttered, "but how in hell did I land in jail?"

Measured footsteps came along the corridor, and Lon recognized the high-shouldered shape of Sam Masters. The young deputy marshal—he was only a couple of years older than Lon—had a cool, almost sardonic way of looking at a man. He grinned in at his prisoner.

"Feelin' better, Carmichael?" he asked. "I ain't much of a doctor, but I put a little hoss liniment on the gash in your scalp and wrapped a bandanna around it. You've got a good hard head, though, so I guess there ain't no need to call in the doc."

Lon remembered the views he'd overheard Masters voicing. This man favored farm money. He might not be a friend, but he was certainly no enemy. Lon's answering smile was a little rueful.

"You done a good job," he said slowly. "Better'n the one I started."

Masters held up his hand. "Carmichael," he said coolly, "you're in here charged with assault and battery, so be keerful. Anything you say can be used ag'in yuh when you come up before Judge Spencer in the morning."

"So that's the charge," Lon said slowly.

Masters nodded. "Hell," he went on mildly, "you cain't come into this town and start beatin' up our prominent citizens without something happening. Things ain't like they used to be around here."

"No, but they damned soon will be," Lon said bitterly. "Who hit me, anyway?"

"Why, now, I guessed it was Gillin," said the lawman mildly. "Leastways he said he done it." His eyes were narrowly on Carmichael. "Claims you walked into his office and jumped him without no reason. Says he got away and cracked you over the haid with that mallet he uses to set type. 'Course, I've buffaloed a few men myself, but usually with a .45 and the crease in your scalp looked powerful like a Colt had been bent over your ear. Howsomever, it ain't my business to call a man a liar, 'ticularly when he's got a beaut of a black eye, a nose that ain't never goin' to look the same again, and a chin that's plumb lacerated. So you done all right for yourself, Carmichael. Mebbe it was worth the twenty-five Judge Spencer will assess you."

Lon felt in his pants pocket. Five silver dollars jingled through his fingers. "I've got five dollars," he said, "and I ain't likely to see much more till harvest."

"Sho" now," Sam Masters said, "mebbe the jedge will hear that ahead of time. "I, uh, don't think he's any too fond of *The*

Register, after some of the things Gillin has said about him. So—"

The marshal's veiled friendliness made Lon relax. "Masters," he said soberly, "I rode in tonight kind of as a last hope to try and dig up somethin' that would make King Kalan change his mind about keeping that fence across Cowskin Ford. Got me the notion that mebbe I could tie him into the campaign that's bringing Texas Jack Martin and his kind back to Wichita. Figgered if I could do that mebbe we'd leastways know *why* he's got a gun-tough crew now, and what he aims to gain by turnin' cattlemen ag'in the rest of us."

"The way it looks to me he stands to lose as much as any of you," Sam Masters said slowly. "He'll get burnt out, and his crops tromped right along with you Cowskin sodbusters. So how's he stand to gain?"

"That's what I'm drivin' at," Lon said grimly, "but I'm not getting very far. The only thing I know for sure is that Gillin will fight before he'll talk—and that somebody walked in while I had him down and whaled me with a Colt. So the story he told you ain't worth a damn."

"The hell of it is," Masters said regretfully, "you're the man who broke the Law. Them gents are slick, too slick for the likes of you and me."

Sparks started to dance in Lon's eyes. "They're slick, all right," he admitted, "and I'm nothing but a slow poke sod-buster, but by Heaven I ain't going to quit until the Chisholm is open again!"

SAM MASTERS walked back down the corridor shaking his head, and Lon heard the outside door slam. He was alone in the jail, save for a dozing turnkey in the marshal's office. His head still throbbed, and he was weary in every bone and muscle. Sleep could help that feeling, and there wasn't another thing he could do until morning brought release. He thought regretfully of his promise to join the meeting at the Fords. Eileen and his dad, and all the rest of them would be worried. Particularly Eileen. They hadn't said much about it yet, but Lon Carmichael had kinda looked forward to a wedding in the Fall, after the crops were in. Now there wouldn't be any crops unless . . . He dozed into fitful slumber.

At first Lon thought he was dreaming when he heard his name spoken, and then the cell door rattled as someone shook the bars, and he came awake, blinking.

The lantern was burning low in the corridor, and the man standing out there was wearing a black hat that shadowed his face. He was small, hunched in a big overcoat, and he kept his hands in his pockets.

"Carmichael," his voice was little more than a whisper, "there'll be five thousand dollars waiting for you at Wells Fargo in the morning if you'd care to pick it up, and hop the Santa Fe east. Jest don't come back, that's all."

Anger drove the ache from Lon's head. Refusal was on his lips, and then a hand seemed to clamp about his throat. He grew suddenly cool, and his mind began to function. The forces that had promoted Wichita as the true terminus of the Chisholm—and then closed the Trail—were the only ones who could put up five thousand dollars to get him out of town. He had evidently been closer to the end of a trail than he'd realized, or they'd never have made this offer.

"Well?" the muffled man said.

"I'll pick up the money from the hombre who sent you here and nobody else," Lon told him coolly. "Take that, or leave it lay, mister!"

"I'll take it and bring you an answer in an hour, Carmichael. So mebbe you better get ready to change your mind. That is a heap of dinero to hand airy sod-buster."

Lon watched the small man out of sight then settled again on the cot, his mind in turmoil. The other had been right when he'd said five thousand dollars was a heap of money to hand a farmer. Irrelevantly, Lon wondered how many years it would be before he could count that sum in farm earnings.

"I must be a bigger nuisance than I figgered!" he thought grimly.

And again he hit the same old treadmill. What could Kalan gain by antagonizing Texas cattlemen? Who was behind the scheme? Why did they want to bring ruin to Cowskin Creek?"

The small man was back in less than an hour. "You win," he said gruffly. "Here's twenty-five cartwheels to pay your fine to Spencer in the morning. Afterwards step into the Keno House. They'll take care of you."

Lon took the money, and a wicked re-

solve had started to run through him. He nudged the water bucket with his boot, and the pail tipped with a clang. Water cascaded through the bars, drenching the pants and shoes of the man in the corridor.

"Damned clumsy sod-buster!" the hunched man snarled, and leaped back. "Soaked hell out of me."

"I'm sure sorry," Lon drawled, "and me thirsty too. Tell that turnkey to come back and get this bucket when you go out."

The other was still cursing as he tramped down the hall leaving wet footprints behind him. Lon was smiling and the reckless light was still in his eyes when the old jailer came shuffling back to his cell. He fumbled with his keys and stuck one in the lock.

"Hand me out the bucket, son," he said nasally. "I'll be right back. Sure and you got some crack on the haid—"

"Mebbe the judge will remember that in the morning," Lon drawled, "and not hold too much ag'in me." He dropped the heavy bucket on the jailer's toes, and when the man bent forward, Lon yanked him into the cell, and sent him spinning along toward the cot.

"You can sleep good tonight," he said in the same cool tones, and stepped into the corridor.

The turnkey sputtered, "Carmichael, you cain't do this. Why you danged young fool, Jedge Spencer will forget there's a key to this jail when they ketch you ag'in—"

"They ain't going to catch me," Lon said. "You tell Sam Masters I'm doin' him a favor. Figger he'll understand—"

He slammed the door and made his run for the marshal's office. There were guns in a locked glass-faced cabinet against the wall. Lon smashed the glass with a paper weight, and selected a bone-handled .45. He stuffed shells into it and loaded his pocket with another hand-full. Weapon tucked inside the waistband of his pants, he followed the print of wet shoes out of the marshal's office.

No more than five minutes had elapsed since the little man had left, Lon figured, and his long strides carried him along the boardwalk that led to Douglas Avenue. The wet footprints were black against the boards. Lon smiled. The hunched man didn't realize he was leaving a trail, a trail that might lead a sod-buster to hell—or glory.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trail to Glory

ON THE corner of Douglass, Lon paused. Wichita was buzzing with excitement tonight. Anticipating the coming of Texas Jack, the townsmen were starting to celebrate in advance. Throngs jostled along the Avenue, some heading toward the Keno House to the left. Others were beating a path to different saloons up and down the side-streets. Somewhere a gun banged noisily. Lon relaxed a little. The shot would draw the attention of Sam Masters, and that was one man he did not want to see again tonight.

He scanned the walk in the light of flaring coal-oil street lamps and for a moment he thought scuffling feet had smeared out those dark footprints, and then in the dust of the street itself he saw the muddy marks leading to the opposite curb. Lon realized that he'd unconsciously expected them to turn toward the Keno House. Instead they were moving to the right, down the opposite walk. Lon was puzzled. He began to wonder if his hunch that the small man would head from the jail to make a report to his superiors had been a good one, and then his eyes, questing forward, saw the two-story bulk of *The Register* rising on the corner ahead.

The muddy tracks stopped in front of the newspaper office. On his first visit, there had been light behind the windows. Now there was none. Lon touched the door knob. It turned easily beneath his hand, but there was a latch on the inside. He could feel it hold the door, and he reached grimly for the Colt he'd borrowed.

"Might as well add 'breakin' and enterin' to the rest they got ag'in me," Lon thought. He swung the gun-barrel against the glass, and stepped casually to hide the opening he'd made as a pair of roisterers surged past him.

"Hear tell somebody took a pot shot at Masters a while ago," one of them chuckled. "Hope they tree him good next time. He's too stiff-necked to suit me—"

"Wait till Texas Jack gits here," the other prophesied. "He'll clean the deadwood outa this town, includin' them pesky nesters down along the Cowskin. Won't be long either." The man's fading words as the

pair strolled on hit Lon's ear like a thunder-clap. "They're claimin' down at the Keno House that the dust of his herd was sighted at sunset."

Lon's fingers clenched about the bone handle of the Colt. Time was running out!

He reached through the jagged break in the door, found the catch and released it. Quietly he stepped inside and shut the door behind him. Light from the corner street lamp seeped through the dusty windows, and he was able to make out the stairway across the big room. Silent in the gloom, he listened for any tell-tale sound of voices, and then made his way to the stairs. A worn riser creaked loudly beneath his tread, and he froze against the wall, again listening. No sound came to him from Pete Gillin's office across the landing at the head of the stairs, but as he mounted higher, he could see a crack of light beneath the paneled door above.

One mistake now might bring death. Lon took his time, and all the while the words he'd heard in front of *The Register* were ringing like a knell through his mind: "They're claimin' down at the Keno House that the dust of Texas Jack's herd was sighted at sunset."

He was at the head of the stairs now, and moving silently he crossed to the door and dropped down to peer through the keyhole. He could see Gillin's desk, and a segment of the room, and all of it seemed empty.

Lon lifted, and turned the doorknob gently. The door moved inward slowly, and he followed it, gun poised in his right hand. Pete Gillin's office was empty as he had guessed, and yet now he could hear the hum of voices. A glance to the left located them, for an inner door stood slightly ajar. Lon had presumed it to be a closet on his earlier visit, but now he realized there was a conference room behind the door. That was where the man had come from who'd buffaloed him on his first trip, he guessed.

Cat-footed, feeling the lift of excitement in his own blood, Lon moved to the wall, and pressed himself close to the door. He couldn't see the men inside, but some of the voices he recognized immediately.

Pete Gillin's husky voice was easy to distinguish. So was the booming voice of King Kalan, and the snarling whine of Scar Brady. There was another, more suave tone, that Lon couldn't place until he heard the whispery voice of the hunched man name the owner of the Keno House.

"And so, Mister Pryor," the little man was saying, "he took the twenty-five for his fine, and he'll be around to see you in the morning."

Kent Pryor chuckled. "I never misjudge a man," he boasted. "There ain't a one living who won't sell out if the price is right."

"I still say I could have ridden in alongside the jail and shot him through the window of his cell," Brady snarled. "That five thousand would look just as good in my pants as his!"

"You're kill-crazy, Scar," Pete Gillin snapped. "Pull trigger on this deal too soon, and you'll have an army waiting at the toll-bridge to welcome Texas Jack. We'll never miss that five thousand when the harvest starts to come in, and I vote that we take a drink to King Kalan! It was his genius that organized this party. Why, inside of another few months we'll all be kings. The Four Kings of Wichita!"

LON heard glasses clink, and then Kalan's slight cough. "The Carmichaels," he said, "have been one of our chief stumbling blocks. Those Cowskin sod-busters look to them for leadership, and it may be necessary yet to let Scar shoot the old man. But I believe with the boy out of the way they will become so disorganized that it won't be hard to drive them off their land. We will take over the properties then, and prove up on them, and all the land between the toll-bridge and Cowskin Ford will belong to us. No one will be able to prove our connection. Texas Jack Martin will be blamed for driving them out. He's going to be wilder than a longhorn bull when he sees barb wire across the Chisholm. He'll burn every sod-bust shanty on the creek, and if a few nesters get killed in the bargain it will just speed up the take-over."

Kent Pryor's smooth voice broke in. "Each man to his last. I will see to it that there will be some wrecked saloons along Douglass. Prime those Texans with whisky, and let the right man make a suggestion, and they'll follow like sheep. The Keno House will be the only place for a man to buy a drink before I'm through with my end."

"The Register will back you to the hilt," Pete Gillin said. "There's a few businesses in this town I'd like to control, and I believe we can drive them to the wall without sodbust money to buy their wares. After we skim the cream from Wichita, another advertising campaign will bring in more farmers, and we can ready them for another fleecing."

"Just like fattenin' a hog for the butcher!" Scar Brady gloated. "Me'n my boys will take care of the Law end. Masters won't live long, and neither will any other marshal that bucks us."

Chairs scraped inside the room and Lon froze against the wall. The conference was breaking up more abruptly than he'd anticipated, and for one wild moment he thought of stepping into the inner room and laying his Colt on the group. But even if he herded them all outside, and got them as far as the jail, it would be only his word against theirs. Nobody would believe the story he'd have to tell: that this quartet was trying to gain virtual control of Wichita!

Steps were coming closer to the door. Gun lifted high, Lon pressed against the wall. With luck the panel would hide him as they left the conference room. Without luck, he realized grimly, he'd have to try to shoot his way out of here, and one gun against five were long odds.

The door tipped toward Lon, almost touched his flat body, then halted in its swing. Boots tramped across Gillin's office, and Scar Brady growled, "If I'd hit that sod-buster a little harder after he jumped you, Pete, we wouldn't be handin' him that five thousand in the morning."

"And Masters would have demanded a lot more answers," Gillin snapped. "We're playing this the smart way. There'll be time enough to get rough later on when we have our own judge on the bench, and can hand-pick our juries."

The office door slammed behind them, and Lon heard their boots tramp downstairs. He followed them to the outer door, and had it partly open when Scar Brady's shout came whipping up the stairs to him.

"Somebody busted in this glass. I'll lay you odds it was that damned sod-buster, and that he's in here. Now we'll have to kill him!"

Lon cursed under his breath and swung a glance across his shoulder. There was a window in the opposite wall, but it was probably a good eighteen foot drop to the ground from this second story room. He could hear Brady running for the stairs, followed by the excited shouts of the others. The window was his only chance. He dared not risk a shoot-out with Brady and the rest, for this was not the time to die. There was more at stake than he'd realized. Wichita itself was treatened.

Turning he made his run across the office, and threw up the sash. Brady had moved fast. Lon heard the man's Colt roar behind him as he swung himself out over the ledge, and hung by his fingers. Brady was shouting orders to those below.

"He's going out the window. Get around there and drop him!"

Lon forced his tense body to relax. He let all the air out of his lungs, and loosed his grip. Raw bricks scraped his cheek, then he struck with a jar that seemed to drive his hips up to his shoulders. Flat on his back for a moment, he drew a great gusting breath into his lungs, and looking up at the window he saw Brady's wide shoulders framed there.

The man said, "Ah!" and fired straight down. Lon felt the bullet slam into the dirt close to his face, and he found the strength to roll over and climb to his knees. His head was still spinning, but he lurched to his feet, and staggered toward the back end of the building.

Behind him a voice yelled, "There he goes!"

Lead ricocheted from the wall beside him, and then his numb legs carried him around a corner of the structure into deeper darkness. He was in an alley now, splashed with light from the kitchens of restaurants and saloons on along the block. The bandage had come loose on his head, and he yanked it off. Blood matted his dark hair, and the drop had made his head start aching again, but one thought came clearly through the pain. He had to get out of Wichita right pronto. Brady would be on his trail in minutes, and all that shooting had probably brought Sam Masters to *The Register*. He, too, would be taking up the trail.

Lon cut back another alley to Douglass, and he saw a dozen or more horses racked in front of The Big Boy Saloon. "They can't kill me any deader, or hang me any

higher for addin' hoss-stealing to the list," Lon thought, and he loosed the tie-rope on a long-legged bay that looked like it could run.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Four Kings of Wichita

BACK up the street a knot of men had gathered in front of *The Register*, and Pete Gillin was waving his arms and talking loud. "This is the second time tonight that someone has tried to burglarize my office. Gentlemen, this town has gone soft. Yes sir, what we need is a little good old-fashioned cowboy justice around here!"

Lon swung the bay from the rail, and grinned. A man had to hand it to Gillin. He'd have everybody calling Texas Jack Wichita's saviour, even if his men did shoot up the town and hand it on a silver platter to the four under-cover kings. He let the bay jog along toward the end of Douglass. If he made a run for it, too much attention would be attracted to him. And as he drifted across the bridge, he thought he'd made it without any trailers. Then a glance over his shoulder showed him a lone horseman coming at a run down Douglass.

He put his own bay to a gallop, swinging south toward the distant black line that marked Cowskin Creek, but the other rider had the faster horse. Lon saw that in the space of minutes, and made his choice. He let his hand fall to the Colt he'd tucked once more inside his belt, and swung the bay to face his pursuer.

His voice rang out a warning as the other rider rushed in through the darkness. "You're covered, mister, and I ain't aimin' to ride back to Wichita alive!"

Star-light glinted on the gold of the newcomer's badge as he came circling around to face Lon. "Put the hog-leg away, Carmichael," Sam Masters dry voice was amused. "I'm glad there ain't any more sod-busters like you around these parts or Wichita would need six more deputies. Assault and battery," he checked off the counts against Lon, "breaking jail, theft of fire-arms, forcible entry, and hoss-stealin'. That ain't a bad record for one peaceable nester to run up in a single night. Fact is, you've been sech a danged inspiration to me that I've decided to throw in with you."

He unhooked his badge as he talked, and shoved it into his pocket. "Pete Gillin, King Kalan, and Kent Pryor were frothing so much about you back there in front of *The Register* that I'm beginning to wonder if mebbe you found the right tails to twist. If you-all did you're going to need company."

Lon felt elation fill him. He put out his hand impulsively. "Masters, there ain't a man I'd rather have siding me on the ride I've got to make tonight!"

"More deviltry?" The dryness was still in the marshal's tone.

Lon sobered. "We'll know more about that after we rout Texas Jack Martin out of his blankets."

* * *

There were lights in the Ford soddy when Lon and Masters swung into the yard. It was late now, but evidently his dad had kept the group here, figuring he'd get back, Lon realized.

The sound of their approach brought old Tom to the door. The slender shape of a girl stood at his shoulder, and Lon recognized Eileen Ford with a tightness gathering in his throat. This fight was for her as much as anyone else. It was for all these folks that they might keep their dreams of independence, and their hope of establishing decent homes and fine farms.

"It's Lon!" Eileen pushed past old Tom and came on flying feet to the side of his horse.

He caught her hands, and held them for a moment, but his eyes were on his father and the rest of the Cowskin men and women who came crowding into the yard.

"There ain't much time for talk," he told them bluntly. "A lot of things have happened tonight that I can't take time to explan right, but I'm glad you've all waited. And here's what I want you to do. Get busy and fix up an armful of straw torches. Soak 'em with coal-oil, and keep 'em handy. I'm hoping we won't need 'em, but if we do I want them ready when we get back here."

"We'll be here," old Tom said grimly.

"I'll be waiting too," Eileen Ford said softly, and Lon carried her words away with him like the remembered refrain of a song.

Taking a short-cut trail past their own farm, Lon led the way across Cowskin

Creek, and out through the trees on the yonder bank. Starlight glinted on the taut strands of barb wire that encircled King Kalan's land.

"Now I know why he didn't give a damn what kind of posts we cut for him," Lon said once to his companion. "He wasn't figuring on this fence staying up long."

From the crest of a knoll, they could see the low square bulk of Kalan's soddy, and lights behind the windows. "Make a right nice little fort for his gun-crew," Masters said.

But a good share of his men weren't in the soddy. They saw that as they passed a corner post and swung to the right toward the Chisholm. Blotches in the night, Lon counted three riders near the gate Kalan had left in the fence crossing the Trail.

"Guards," Masters said. "Them torches your sod-busters are makin' up won't burn steel wire, Carmichael."

Lon chuckled without mirth. "They'll light haystacks, and grain, and keep a gun-crew hopping while a couple of us get busy with wire-cutters."

"Seguro!" Sam Masters exclaimed. "But if that's your plan, how come we're wasting time on this ride?"

Lon looked at his companion for a long moment as they swung their mounts into the Chisholm. "I ain't never put a bullet through a man," he said quietly, "and I hope I never have to. We people along the Creek want peace not war, and I'm hopin' if we explain the situation to Texas Jack he'll be willing to hold his herd until we can smoke Kalan and his bunch into the open and make 'em open the Trail."

Sam Masters shook his head. "Martin," he said, "is tough as a boot. A vinegaroon from the haunts of Hell. He'll not hold a herd for God nor the Devil. I know that old warhorse!"

"We'll see," Lon said.

The Chisholm Trail stretched out before them, a winding white highway against the darker prairie, a road of empire that no man had a right to close as long as it remained useful. Lon felt the full majesty of it there beneath the stars, and he knew in his heart that the trail would never be closed again to Texas cattle if they managed to destroy this last threat to lasting peace.

They crested a long rise and Lon felt his heart seem to stop. Spread out there across the prairie was a dark blanket of bedded cattle that seemed to stretch to the horizon.

"Lord!" Sam Masters said softly, "Jack must have put all his chips into this one pot. Carmichael, we're beat before we start. You can't hold a herd this big."

The single glowing eye of a chuck-wagon fire beckoned them to a copse of trees just off the Trail. A night herdsman in from his trick was squatting on his heels warming the coffee-pot when they rode into the camp. Other men were bedded down underneath the chuck-wagon, and blanket-wrapped beneath the trees. Lon spotted at least two dozen, and there might be more hands in the farther darkness. Texas Jack had brought a big crew of tiger-tough Texicans as usual. Enough men to run Wichita up a tree and keep it there. Enough men to smash every soddy along Cowskin Creek.

LON felt himself tightening all over, but the grim last chance hope that had brought him here would not die.

"Light and set, strangers," the cowpoke at the fire invited. "Coffee's most done."

"We came to see Texas Jack," Lon said. "He caught up with you fellers yet?"

"Been with us since we crossed the Canadian," the Texican drawled. "That old wart-hog couldn't miss a drive. Likes to smell the dust, he claims. I'll fetch him and wrangle a bottle. Jack won't like gittin' waked up, less'n there's a drink handy."

"Tell him," the marshal murmured, "that an old friend's come to see him. Might mention the name of Sam Masters."

"Sam Masters?" a voice bellowed from beneath the trees. "Hell-n-damnation where's my boots?"

Lon looked at his companion in surprise, and Masters grinned. "When I was a button I used to wrangle hosses for Jack. Guess he ain't forgot me."

A giant of a man came stamping out of the gloom. A full gray beard dropped to the first button of his blue shirt. Heavy hair reached back from his forehead. His face was bold, craggy, and the look about him was that of an eagle on the wing. There was the quality of ruthlessness, of power,

but no meanness in this giant Texan. It would gain the almost legendary plainsman nothing to destroy the hopes of a few farmers.

"By damn, and you're a sight for sore eyes, Sam!" the Texan's hand engulfed Masters long fingers, and Lon saw the marshal wince involuntarily.

Texas Jack chuckled. "Forgit myself," he boomed. "Gotta take keer of your hands these days, eh, Sam? I read in that there *Register* paper of yores that you was the Law around Wichita."

"Was is about right," Sam Masters said drily. "Right now I'm consortin' with a jail-breaker, a burglar, and a hoss thief. Meet Lon Carmichael of Cowskin Creek."

Texas Jack Martin's eyes were a glittering blue. They studied Lon from boots to head, missing nothing.

"You got the marks of a sod-buster about ye," he rumbled. "Let me look at ye good. You're the fust one I've ever seen with the gumption to bust loose!"

Sam Masters voice turned serious. "He had his reasons, Jack. Enough to make me throw in with him. Mebbe you'll feel the same after we finish talking."

Texas Jack shrugged massive shoulders. "Lay your cards on the table, boys," he invited. "We got to get our sleep around this camp. I aim to bed this outfit down on the t'other side of the Cowskin tomorrow night!"

Lon drew a deep breath. This was what he had come for, and suddenly all the tightness was gone from his throat. He looked directly at the giant plainsman and began to talk. He told of the coming of King Kalan to Cowskin Creek, of what the man had done. He spoke simply, from the heart, of their own small hopes and plans, and dimly as he talked Lon became aware of other shapes drifting in to form a silent circle about the chuck-wagon fire. The crew was drawing chips! He talked on, telling Texas Jack of his visit to Wichita and what he had learned of Kalan's plans.

"We can smoke them out into the open if you give us a little time," he said earnestly. "We'll open the trail for you, and wish you luck to boot. You can't circle Kalen's to the left, there's bogs in the Creek. And if you come 'round to the right we won't have a crop left after you make a new crossing."

Texas Jack Martin hadn't said a word. He stood with his head cocked a little forward, like an eagle studying its prey. "And jest what you figure to do iffen I decide to push through?"

Lon looked up at the big Texican, and knew he'd lost his fight. "I aim to make a try at openin' the Trail for you tonight with fire, and sixguns, and wire-cutters."

Texas Jack Martin's head tipped back, and his laughter made the leaves rustle. "By Heaven that's good!" he roared. "Now me, I'm a God-fearin' man, and I read the Bible regular. Well leastways I give it a gander once in a while, and it seems to me I recollect a yarn in there about a feller named David who jumped a big cuss called Goliath. Whupped him, too. And I got me an idee you could do the same, sod-buster, but hell-n-blazes you don't need to be so danged selfish about it. What's wrong with me and my Texicans? Ain't we entitled to a leetle fun? Polishin' off gunslicks and tearin' down fences is right fine sport. You got any objections to our drawin' cards in your game, Carmichael?"

Lon tipped back on his heels, and the expression on his face must have been enough answer, for Texas Jack chuckled, "Oil your guns boys, and climb into your pants. We're takin' a ride, and when we git to Wichita we'll give some gents there a hoorawin' they won't forgit in a hurry. Wouldn't be surprised if Kent Pryor might be willing to sell out cheap after we git done with his Keno House. And *The Register*. That thar newspaper is goin' to be for sale tomorry night or my name ain't Texas Jack Martin!"

CHAPTER SIX

Death Rides the Chisholm

LON and Masters found Old Tom and the rest of the Cowskin farmers waiting restlessly in the Ford yard. Some of the men had saddled horses, others had hurried to their homes for firearms. It was a grimly desperate outfit that waited Lon's report.

And leaning across the horn of his saddle, he outlined what had happened. "Folks," he said, and his voice was humble, "we can thank our God tonight for

men like Texas Jack Martin. I was figuring we might have to make a try at opening the Chisholm ourselves, and I knew some of us wouldn't come back if we did. Now most of you can go home, and get some sleep. Texas Jack is riding for Kalan's right now, and me'n Sam aim to Injun in from this side and fire the big haystack near his barn. It'll be Martin's signal to head for the fence. He and his Texicans will take care of the wire-cutting!"

"You two ain't makin' that ride alone," young Billie Ford said, and his voice was suddenly that of a grown man. "We've been watching the road, and Kalan and Scar Brady, and four more riders passed by an hour ago. Includin' Kalan and Brady that'll total twelve men. And they're all set for trouble. Me, I'm set for it too, and I'm ridin' with you whether yuh like it or not!"

Old Tom Carmichael brought a horse from the shadows of the soddy. "I am also riding," he said soberly. "No, don't argue," he hefted a big Sharps as easily as a feather. "I used to shoot buffalo with this gun. It stopped them right in their tracks, and it should do the same to men who seek to destroy the peace of the prairies!"

He mounted, and bowed his head for a moment, and Lon Carmichael knew that his father was offering a silent prayer. He bowed his own head, but no words would come into his mind. Death was going to ride the Chisholm tonight, and there might be some who would not see the sun rise in the morning.

Billie Ford passed them each a pair of torches wrapped in copies of *The Register* and swung into his own saddle.

Eileen Ford came to Lon's side, and her hand sought his again. "There will be no more trouble," she said softly. "Come back to me, Lon."

Stirrup to stirrup, they left the Ford's, and again crossed the Cowskin. Lon rode close to the shining steel of Kalan's fence, and leaned from the saddle to cut the strands of barbed wire where a coulee gave them some cover.

"Lead the way," Masters said gruffly. "You know this stretch better than me."

"Single file," Lon gave his orders. "It ain't more'n a half mile to the barn from here. If luck's with us we ought to fire the haystack before any of 'em spot us."

He led the way slowly along the coulee, and the roofline of Kalan's long barn came into view against the sky. And out beyond, in that yonder darkness, Texas Jack Martin waited with fifteen hand-picked warriors, waited the signal of flaming hay.

They were closer now. Lon could see light behind the windows of Kalan's soddy. It was the only sign that he and his men were primed for trouble. Otherwise the night was peaceful as a thousand other Kansas nights had been, and yet Lon felt himself tensing. Some inner sense was warning him that they were riding into a trap if they kept on toward the high mound of hay stacked in the barn-yard.

He held up his hand signaling the rest to halt. "If you were settin' in Kalan's shoes, where would you figure we'd strike?" he asked softly.

He saw Sam Masters head go back, and the marshal took his time about answering. "I'd figure you might try and burn the barns and hay, and I'd get me some extry gunslingers to post down there away from the house where I could catch you with cross-fire. Wouldn't be much left of airy bunch caught in between—"

Lon was dismounting as the marshal gave his views. He handed the reins to Billie Ford, and took an extra torch from the boy. "Kalan's bunch won't be lookin' for a gent crawling along through the grass. You gents stay here. I'm going in alone—"

"No!" Old Tom started to protest.

"My party this time," Lon said briefly, and he moved away from them before the others could protest.

The darkness was a protecting blanket, but men with their eyes accustomed to the starlight could see a surprising distance. Understanding this, he circled the barn to come in from the East. A hundred yards from the stack he dropped to his hands and knees. That hay had to go up. Texas Jack Martin would not move until it became a flaming beacon against the sky.

Lon crawled closer. The stench of kerosene was strong in his nostrils, the paper-wrapped torches oily and slippery in his hands. Sweat dripped down from his matted hair to sting his eyes, but he kept moving steadily forward. Thirty yards from the stack, he dropped forward to his stom-

(Continued on page 95)

He was a top-hand bronc-buster.

HANG the PRAIRIE PIRATES!

By MILES HOWARD

MIKE SHANE woke with a dry, bitter taste in his mouth. Out in the kitchen he could hear Ann readying breakfast and the cheerful bellowing of young Michael, and the happy baby voice of infant Ann. He put his hand to his throbbing forehead, and he didn't need to glance through the window to know the morning sun was shining.

A nightmare sky! Drought was stalking California from San Diego to Ureka. There were reports of cattle and sheep dying on the ranges. Other thousands were being slaughtered for hides and tallow.

The only men in the state who might not suffer were the Wheat Kings of the Sacramento—this dry weather would harden the golden kernels they'd ship to Liverpool, where a perennially hungry Europe clamored for California's "white plush," as they called the hard wheat. Those Kings of Wheat would survive, and there was one of them, at least, sitting in his Yuba office who'd be smiling at the sight of that empty sky.

Joe Kroner would be sitting there like an over-stuffed toad, thinking of Lauson Meadow, wondering when Mike Shane and the damn-fool farmers who had followed him to the meadow might be ready to pack their wagons and roll.

Of course, if some of them wanted to stay they could work for him. Tear out the fruit trees and berry vines and ready the good black land for the wheat that belonged there. Most any of them could stay except Mike Shane, and nothing would please Joe Kroner more than to see him go.

That thought brought a grim pleasure to Mike as he lathered his face and stropped his razor. He looked into the mirror above the washbasin, a tall, hard man of forty.

Mike Shane, sod-buster, could only save the women and kids of Lauson Meadow from the starvation-planting Wheat Kings of California, if he knotted a slick hemp rope around his own neck—to pay for piracy on the high desert!

His forehead was broad above thick, bleached brows.

The chin was a fighter's chin, square and stubborn, and the line of his mouth showed a certain intolerance. A thrusting, driving man Mike Shane. A dreamer ready to dream, and then fight to bring those dreams into being.

A riverman to start with, he had foreseen no future in the packets that plied the Sacramento and the Yuba, but from the pilot-house he had studied the rich land and on one trip to Yuba-town he'd noticed the green basin that was Lauson Meadow. Mike knew many things besides the river boats, too. At one time he was a top hand broncbuster.

Somehow it had escaped the avaricious eyes of the Kings of Wheat who were busy building up their empires farther out in the valley.

Mike Shane had visioned Lauson Meadow as a community of small farms that would grow the things people wanted to eat. No man with a few dozen acres could compete with the Wheat Kings. They had steam tractors, and armies of men to harvest their crops. The few land-holders who had tried to raise wheat in the Sacramento had been swallowed by the lords of the land, so the thing to do was raise something beside wheat.

Mike Shane had planned it all. Twenty acres to the farm—small enough to make men who owned a hundred thousand acres laugh at first. But later Joe Kroner and some of the other one-crop advocates had quit laughing. They had watched land-hungry settlers take their small savings and come from Sacramento and even San Francisco to form a pool and buy Lauson Meadow from the Yuba National Bank.

Mike had organized a wagon train to bring lumber from the mills in the Sierras to build their homes, right nice cottages the folks up-river in Yuba had to admit.

But what were those fool farmers going to grow? A man couldn't make a living on twenty acres!

Mike Shane had shown them different. A few cattle, a couple of brood sows, a couple of hundred berry vines. Fresh vegetables, for which Sacramento clamored. And the rest to fruit trees.

No one along the Yuba had ever seen the like, and these men and women who had followed Mike Shane into Lauson Meadow had watched success crown their efforts.

Years of abundant rainfall, and therein lay the Achilles Heel of the project. Mike Shane woke more than one night in a cold sweat wondering what would happen if a year of drought came along. Ann would try and make him sleep again.

"The rains are regular," she would sooth.

Mike's answer might be a bitter laugh, and his mobile lips would twist. The worst of it was there were other men in the colony as optimistic as his own wife. He tried to talk to them, but when he mentioned irrigation they'd point to gleaming green acres and clap him on the shoulder and accuse him of crying wolf.

So now the drought had come and men watched new shoots die on the vines, and they saw their rows of young vegetables wither. The fruit trees would not blossom this year and only the hardiest might survive. There were some in the colony who wished now that they'd heeded Mike Shane —and there were others who cursed him behind their hands.

The happiest man along the Yuba was Joe Kroner.

MIKE SHANE wiped lather from his face and ducked his head toward the wash basin, and he heard the wild tinkle of glass in the mirror. Slivers showered down across his thick pale hair, and Mike raised his head almost stupidly, hardly crediting his ears with the clang of the rifle shot that filled the hot morning. There was a neat round hole in the outside window, and another with splintered glass surrounding it in the mirror.

A horse's hoofs scrabbled in the pear orchard, thudding on the parched earth, and from the kitchen Ann screamed once, piercingly, and then Mike heard her come racing into the bedroom.

He was turned by the time she reached him. The first puzzlement was wearing from his big face, and a slow anger was starting to mount in him, like heat waves rising off dry land.

"Mike," Ann cried. "Mike, you're hurt?"

"No."

"Hold still," she said, and stood on tiptoe to reach the top of his head. Her hands

were shaking, and Mike Shane knew his wife was thinking the same thoughts that were in his mind. Ann was a Yuba girl, and Mike Shane had married her only after he'd made certain she'd give up a school teacher's security to join the uncertain future of a farmer with a dream. And being a Yuba girl she knew all the old violence of gold-field days was not gone from the valley. The rifle and the Colt still settled their share of arguments.

Little Ann was wailing in the kitchen, sensing this excitement, but right now her mother had eyes only for her husband.

"Mike," she stepped back a little, and said what Shane had been afraid she'd say. "Mike, it's come."

He knew what she meant.

"You stood up in the meeting at the schoolhouse last night, and let your temper get away with you, after Joe Dobson made the motion that perhaps we should sell to Joe Kroner and salvage a little. You got on your hind legs and told everybody that you'd personally whip the socks off the next man who even suggested such a thing."

"Divided we fall, together we stand." Mike Shane reached in the closet for a clean shirt. "That's what I told 'em, Ann. If one man sells to Kroner we're all lost. He'd start to spread and grab and pretty soon he'd own us all. That's what I told them."

"You promised them a miracle," Ann said, "and it made me afraid right then. Maybe Kroner had a man listening at a window and that's why they just tried to kill you. Kroner doesn't want you to save the meadow. Mike, Mike," Ann Shane's brown eyes started to fill with tears, "let's give in!"

"You wouldn't be very proud of a quitter," Mike Shane said.

Ann wiped her eyes, and clutched at the only hope she could find. "You promised them water," she whispered. "A miracle. It's too late now to build a pumping plant or diversion dam, even if we could raise the money. You promised them a miracle, but you wouldn't answer their questions, and you wouldn't even answer mine after we got home. Remember?"

"Yes," Mike told her, and the edge of a dry smile moved his lips, and he was also remembering his throbbing head and aching eyes this morning. He had spent most of the night staring into the darkness, trying to figure a way to keep that promise, and one elusive idea had kept dancing just beyond the range of consciousness.

"I didn't answer them," he said slowly, "because I couldn't. And I can't answer you now. I ran a bluff to keep men steady to their trust—" the smile was gleaming now—"and it must have been a good one. Someone must believe I can produce water, or they wouldn't have taken that shot at me!"

"But you can't," Ann said.

Mike Shane buttoned his shirt. "I can try," he said simply.

He reached inside the closet again, and when his hand came forth, Ann Shane cried out sharply. "Mike, not with a gun!"

Shane looked down at his Colt in its worn holster. He hadn't worn it much since packet-days. "My dear," he said calmly, "I'm not going to use it unless I have to. But there is someone here along the river who is a heap smarter than me. *Someone who has already figured out a way to save our farms.*

"I have the answer in my head," he added musingly, "but I can't bring it close enough to recall. It played hide and seek with me all night. When—"

Michael's young voice came whooping into them as the kitchen door slammed. "Dad. Mom. I saw him. I saw that man with the rifle, and I think it was Joe Dobson!"

The boy came running into the bedroom. "I was out by the barn," he said excitedly, "and he didn't see me, but I got a kind of look at him through the pear trees when he rode off, and I'm pretty sure it was Mr. Dobson. Dad," his young brow furrowed, "why should he want to shoot you?"

Mike Shane looked down, and smiled at his son. "I don't know, Michael," he said gently, "but I aim to find out."

He turned his level eyes to Ann. "It looks like Joe Kroner's man was in the schoolhouse last night instead of at the window—"

"What are you going to do?" Ann Shane asked.

Mike looked at her and flexed his fingers. "I'm going to make Dobson into a good colony man once I'm sure he's my party."

He was sure within the next thirty minutes. Joe Dobson's gray mare was in the man's barn, and there were saddle-marks

on her. She had been ridden that morning, ridden hard.

MIKE had left his own horse behind Dobson's barn, and he walked toward the man's house, with his arms swinging easily at his sides. The brazen sun beat through his shirt, and already a faint hot breeze was stirring like a bitter dirge in the pear trees. How many more days like this could they stand?

Dobson's house needed paint, he noticed. The man was a bachelor, and bachelors made poor farmers.

Dobson was at his kitchen table, eating, and the room was full of greasy smoke when Mike pushed open the door and entered.

Dobson blinked. His heavy face needed shaving. The guilt Mike had expected to find lay deep in the man's dark, muddy eyes.

"Breakfasting late, Joe," he said, and there was a deep throbbing in Shane's voice that seemed to fill the kitchen.

"After last night's meeting I over-slept," Dobson said. "By the way, Shane, if you came over to apologize for jumpin' me there why just forget it. All of us get edgy this kind of weather."

"I didn't come to apologize," Mike said. "I came to prove I wasn't talking through my hat last night, Joe. Stand up! I'm going to beat you right out of your socks—and then you're going to tell me why Joe Kroner sent you to kill me this morning."

"He didn't," Dobson started to say, and Mike saw the man's eyes settle cunningly on the Colt at his hip. Dobson knew without question that Mike Shane wouldn't use that gun, and he was already figuring that in a rough and tumble he might get his own hands on it.

"You've done enough shooting for one day, Joe," Mike told him mildly, and he unlatched his belt and turned his head to toss the weapon into a corner.

In that second Dobson moved. He smashed the table in front of him, upending it with a crash that caught Mike Shane in the middle and staggered him backward. Dobson came straight across it like a grizzly. His shoulder smashed Mike's chest, and he lifted his head savagely, butting at Shane's chin.

"You're high and mighty, and you like to push people around, Shane. You and your dreams. Well, they're ended now—"

Mike Shane tasted his own blood, and he realized that the years had slowed him down. Not since Front Street days in Sacramento had he fought a brawler like Dobson.

The farmer drove him backward against the stove. Mike brought up his knee, and he heard Dobson groan. He used both hands to push the man backward, and then his fist swung in a single flashing arc. Mike felt the knuckles crush satisfyingly through beard and skin, but Dobson came bouncing back in. There was no cowardice in this man. Mike took a second blow on the chin that snapped his head back. He backstepped, and let his elbows start to sag, and he saw the gleam of triumph reach Dobson's eyes. The farmer came stepping in confidently, and his guard was not up.

Mike measured him, and he shot his left, and felt the fist sink deeply into Dobson's belly. Dobson bent forward, his mouth questing air. And Mike smashed a straight right, with all the weight of his pivoting body behind it, to the face. He felt the man's nose crush beneath his knuckles, and the sharp feel of broken teeth scraping his fingers. Dobson sagged, his knees seemed weary, and then he fell forward and rolled, and even rolling Mike saw his hand grope out blindly, hoping to feel the gun he'd tossed into the corner.

Dobson lay on his back, and his breath came in short gulps. Bloody froth stained his lips, and one eye was closing fast. Mike stood over him. "More, Joe?"

Dobson's head weaved. "No," he mumbled. "Wouldn't it have been enough to turn me over to the sheriff?"

"You're not going to see the sheriff this trip," Mike said. He watched Dobson closely, and he thought he saw something like hope. "We need every man right here. You tell Joe Kroner that the next time you see him, and I'll forget you tried to shoot me in the back. They still drag bushwhackers out of jail and hang 'em in these parts!"

"Kroner said if you were out of the way it wouldn't be hard to talk the rest into sellin'."

"Was that his only reason for hiring you to plug me?" Mike asked, and saw Dobson's beaten face twitch.

"Yes," Dobson said, "that was all. What more could there be? What in hell more could there be?"

"That's what you're going to tell me," Mike murmured. Mike Shane's face wasn't nice to look at.

Dobson covered his face. "Before God, I don't know nothin'," he cried. "I don't nothing about water—" Then the man started to blubber.

"It's more precious than blood," Mike Shane said slowly. "Yours or mine, Dobson. You'd better start remembering. These boots are hard-toed. They'd cave in a man's ribs in a hurry. They could kick the life out of a man."

"I don't know a thing," Dobson cried hoarsely. "Kroner came back from Sacramento yesterday. I saw him in town, and he told me what to do."

"Sacramento?" Mike said. "What the hell about Sacramento?"

"He didn't want you going there. He didn't even want you ridin' to Yuba," Dobson babbled.

It was more information that he'd hoped to get. Something was beginning to click around in Shane's brain.

Mike picked up his gun-belt. "You hang on here Dobson," he said, "and I'll buy you out myself, after we get water, and pay your steamer fare to 'Frisco. We don't want your kind here."

"You'll never put water on Lauson Meadow," Dobson said bitterly. "Why don't you give up your damned dreams, Shane?"

"Because I can't," Mike Shane told him grimly.

A DEVIL of impatience drove him to the Yuba, and upstream to the high wooden bridge that spanned the slowly-flowing river.

Down along the river-front, a Kroner wheat barge was loading, and through the heat of noon he heard the shouts of dock workmen. The side-wheeler, *Golden Miss,* was tied up at her dock. Dock hands scurried like rats about the pier.

Kroner, Mike thought, had probably come up-river on her, and he hadn't cared before this return whether Mike Shane lived or died. With the drought holding, Lauson Meadow would come to him anyway. That he had believed, until he'd learned something in Sacramento that had made him ready to resort to violence—and Joe Kroner was a careful man, because he had his hat ready to throw in the ring come next election. But if he thought violence was necessary, Kroner could be violent.

It was something to remember. Mike put his horse off the bridge, and turned down toward the docks. He halted near the *Golden Miss,* and stepped quickly aboard.

The mate was an old-time river man. He remembered Mike Shane from the days when he'd been a crack pilot. "I hear you're a farmer now, Captain Shane, and doing right well for yourself," the mate greeted respectfully.

"Until the drought came," Mike Shane said.

"They're figuring a way for the farmers down Sacramento way to lick that," the mate told him.

"And how would that be?" Mike kept his face calm.

"Why they're installing pumps on barges and takin' hose the hydraulickers have sold off to mount on 'em. They tell me you can shoot eight hundred gallons a minute on land near the river. And that's a hell of a lot of water."

Mike Shane leaned against the pilot-house. This was what Joe Kroner had been afraid he'd learn. Then bitterness brought a taste into his mouth. Kroner had nothing to worry about. Before the colony could bring one of those barges from Sacramento their crops would be dead.

Then all at once he felt the *Golden Miss* quiver as the engineer tested his engines below decks, and the elusive shadow that had clung to the edge of his consciousness all the night before came suddenly into clear focus.

The mate's name was Tim Brannigan, and he took his stubby pipe from between his teeth and studied Mike questioningly. "Ye feelin' all right, Captain? I can see nothin' for you to be laughin' about with your crops dyin' for want of rain." Brannigan looked concerned.

"For want of *water,*" Mike corrected him, and he gestured at the river. "Here is all we need, and here," he touched the side of the pilot-house almost caressingly, "is the means to put it on our land. Your pumps can throw a thousand gallons a

minute, and if I can find hose up town, one night's pumping will cover the meadow inches deep. The *Golden Miss* can save our farms. Kroner had it figured out ahead of me," he added half to himself. "This is what he was afraid I'd try if I heard about the barges."

"There's hose aboard consigned to the Little Giant Mining Co., but I'm afeard ye won't be using it or the *Miss,* Captain Shane," the mate said regretfully. "Joe Kroner's chartered her to drag his wheat barge downstream, and we're pullin' out quick as she's loaded."

Mike drew a tortured breath into his lungs. The Wheat King had checkmated him again.

He hardly heard the mate say, "Here comes Cap Cameron and Joe Kroner now, with another buggy right behind 'em. Be damned, and it's the sheriff, with a mighty beat up lookin' gent ridin' with him. Now what in hell do you suppose they'd be wantin'?"

Mike snapped his head around, and an unaccustomed curse dribbled from his lips. Joe Dobson was riding with Sheriff Luke Saunders, and he let out a yell at sight of Mike Shane's tall figure aboard the *Golden Miss.*

"There he is, Sheriff. There's Shane. I told you we'd find him here!"

Mike had made his mistake by not bringing Dobson in and turning him over. And Dobson had crossed the river and beaten him here to town. The charge would be assault and battery. A talk with Luke Saunders might turn the tables, but that would take time—and the bags of wheat were piling higher on the barge. The *Golden Miss* would pull out with the setting sun, and Joe Kroner would have the last laugh with Mike Shane cooling his heels in jail.

Captain Cameron, and Joe Kroner were coming up the gangplank abreast. Mike glanced once at Tim Brannigan, and he said softly, "If you're at the wheel you might steer a little close to the Meadow Shore—"

He was balanced on the balls of his feet then, and he made his run straight down the gang-plank. "Stop there, Shane," Kroner bellowed.

"A bath will do you no harm, Kroner," Mike said, and he dived between the two men. Wooden hand-rails splintered. Mike twisted his hunched shoulders, and he saw Cameron go off one side, and Kroner off the other. Their bodies splashed in the deep water below, and Mike Shane's boots hit the dock.

Sheriff Saunders was tugging to free his Colt, and Mike laid one shot into the planking between him and Dobson. Dobson leaped like a frightened rabbit behind a stack of sacked wheat, and then the sheriff bellowed.

"Halt, damnit. You can't get away with this!"

Mike made his saddle. "I'm going to try, sheriff," he called.

A bullet cut the air above his head, and then he was on the approach to the bridge, and his mount was running free.

MIKE SHANE caught the long bell-pull in the schoolhouse, and the rope burned his palms as he sent the bell's brazen clamor over the stillness of Lauson Meadow. It was a signal that would bring men on the run.

"Keep the kids at their studies," Mike told the teacher, and his voice was harsh. "I'll do my talking from the steps. I won't take long."

Ann Shane was one of the first to reach the school. "I knew you were the one calling us, Mike," she said quietly. "You've had trouble?"

"Not too much," Mike smiled.

Men and women were gathering in the school-yard now, asking each other questions and looking up at Mike Shane standing on the steps above them. He could not see himself, but to them his face looked like one carved on some old coin.

"Folks," Mike told them quietly, "the water will be ours tonight, if some of you men are willing to follow me into a fight that'll likely land us all in jail!"

He had their attention, and he told them in plain words what he'd done that day. "There's hose aboard the *Golden Miss,"* he finished, "and pumps to put the water where we can use it. They'll have a pair of firemen aboard, an engineer, Captain Cameron and the mate. Six of us should be enough to take over the ship."

"That—that's piracy," one man said a little dazedly.

"And what the hell if it is?" another de-

manded. "I'm willing to fight for my land and my family."

Mike named five of the younger men to accompany him, and he told them plainly. "We should have no trouble, but that is something you can't predict."

"Trouble be damned," young Ike Cramer grinned. "Let's go home and get our guns, boys."

"There'll be work for all hands tonight," Mike Shane told them. "Sharpen your hoes, and get out your shovels!"

They met at Shane's as the sun coasted westward, and headed on foot for the river. Mostly they were silent, for everything had been said, but it seemed to Mike as they walked between the stark rows of fruit trees that some of them seemed to be whispering words of entreaty. He tightened his grip on the Winchester rifle tucked beneath his arm.

The colony rowboat, which some of them had used for fishing and duck-hunting in happier days, bobbed in the rushes at the river's edge.

Mike drew it close, and they stepped aboard as he held the painter. The rushes hid them as they waited, and the minutes ticked by. Mike felt the fear come to him that they were too late, that the *Golden Miss* had already started her voyage downstream, and then he saw the steamer's blunt prow round the Yuba bend.

"Here she comes," Ike Cramer whispered.

"If Brannigan is at the wheel, he'll veer in close," Mike said. "He knows our plan. Ike, you and Neely break out the oars, and don't be afraid to bend them. I'll give the word. When we pull alongside grab the landing ladder, and follow me up. We want no gunplay, if it can be avoided. The Law will have enough of bad counts against us as it is."

The paddle-wheels were turning lazily, churning up a white wake. Mike drew a deep breath as he saw the *Golden Miss* veer toward the shore. "Let's go," he said quietly.

The *Golden Miss* seemed to leap through the sunset, towering huge above them as they came alongside. Mike was the first to reach the deck, and he heard a startled exclamation as Captain Cameron stepped from his cabin.

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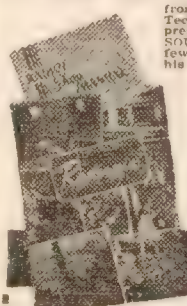

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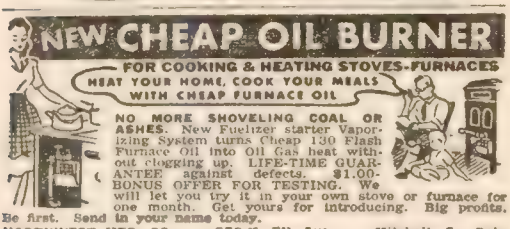
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"Captain," Mike said, "I'm mighty sorry to do this to you." His right flashed out in a short arc. The man went down without a sound, and then the whole evening seemed to explode in one flash of fire before Shane's eyes. He felt himself falling, and he struck Cameron's body and rolled, and faintly he heard the cries of other men fighting, and the dull cough of a gun exploding somewhere.

They had been trapped, Mike thought, taken in, and he struggled back from the great well of darkness that was threatening to close over him.

Joe Kroner's face swam dimly into his range of vision, and the man was smiling. "I brought a few friends along," he drawled, "just to see that something like this didn't happen, Shane."

A shudder ran the length of the *Golden Miss*, and Mike saw the force of it send Kroner stumbling backward. Tim Brannigan, he thought, had deliberately beached the *Miss* close to shore. It would mean Tim's end as a river mate, he was deciding as he pulled his knees under him, but there was going to be a nice farm vacant before long. Joe Dobson wouldn't be a Colony man when this night was over. He launched himself toward Kroner, and his arms circled the Wheat King's thick waist, driving him on backward toward the rail, and he heard a ragged cheer behind him as woodwork splintered. They went over the side together.

Kroner sputtered, and his hair hung dankly over his forehead. "Don't drown me," he begged. "Don't—"

Mike released his hold on the man. "Wallow back to your barge and climb aboard," he said disgustedly. "If you get hungry chew on some of your fancy damn white plush."

They were cheering on deck, and there were plenty of hands to help Mike Shane aboard. Ike Cramer had a black eye and a split lip, and some of the other men bore the marks of battle.

"We showed 'em the light," Ike said, "includin' Dobson, and it's a funny thing, but I don't think we'll get hung for piracy. The sheriff is in the pilothouse with Brannigan, and aimin' to stay up there. He swears he ain't seen a thing!"

(Continued from page 86)

ach, pushing the torches ahead of him. And now against the lighter background of the hay he thought he saw something move. Then he was sure of it for a cautious voice came from one corner of the stack.

"There's hossmen driftin' in from the West, Lige. Lets git around to the other side, and give them sod-busters a welcome they ain't expectin'."

"Somethin's been movin' out East o' here," another voice said.

"Hell, it's likely a coyote," the other grunted. "Them farmers cain't think of more'n one thing at a time. They're in from the West, I tell you. Come on, we'll gutshoot 'em like ducks in a gallery."

LON smiled to himself. Sam Masters would be careful to keep old Tom and Billie Ford out of gun range, but they made fine decoys to give him a clear path to the boy. He watched the pair of men who had been talking move around a corner of the stack, and was up on his knees instantly and crawling closer.

The hay smelled sweet and warm as he pressed against it. He fumbled a sulphur match from his pocket and the tiny flame flared blue as he scratched it alight. Now was the time for speed. He touched the oil-soaked paper about one torch, and pressed it into the hay. He ignited a second and tossed it ten feet away at the base of the stack. The third he held in his hands for an instant, then sent it arcing upward to land atop the stack.

A voice yelled from the barn, "The hay's goin'! Get around there, you fools!"

Lon swung back from the brightening flames, Colt gripped in his hand. He had seconds now to make his run for safety, and then one of the guards came into view. The man snapped a shot at him. Lon returned the fire, and he saw the Wichita gun-tough spin backward. Lead howled across his shoulder, and Lon cursed. Guards were coming from the barn, spreading to cut off his retreat. The hay-stack was brightening the yard by the instant as the flames ate into it.

The other man, who had been on the opposite side of the stack, came into view, Colt spitting. Lon jumped straight toward them. He felt a bullet pluck his sleeve,

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then he centered the other and fired. With a scream the Wichita man staggered straight into the blazing stack.

His own shirt was smoking from the heat and the oil that had soaked from the torches. If a burning ember touched the cloth he'd turn into a human torch himself, Lon realized, and he spun away from the cover the stack had given him.

He heard the thunder of hoofs heading toward the yard, and knew that Sam Masters was coming in from the West. And down there in the South where the Chisholm lay like a pale ribbon across the prairie, he caught the high-pitched yelling of Texas Jack's men riding with Colts and wire-cutters.

The yard was bright all about him now, and a gun bloomed from the open doorway of King Kalan's soddy straight ahead. He heard the high shriek of a bullet past his shoulder, and then from behind him old Tom's Sharps roared authoratively. Lon saw the man in the soddy doorway go backwards as though he'd been clubbed.

He was close to the house now, making a run for it. King Kalan would be in there, and King Kalan had to die before peace could come again.

Lon leaped through the open doorway, and the lamplight inside seemed dim after the glaring brightness of the yard. His foot struck Scar Brady's prone shape, and Lon felt himself falling, but he managed to twist and keep his gun-arm free.

Kalan was backed against a window, and there was confidence still in the man. He swung a short-barreled shotgun to his shoulder. "You're going where all sodbusters belong, Carmichael," he said, and Lon saw the hammers fall as he pressed himself against Scar Brady. The man's dead body shuddered to the tearing impact of buckshot. Lon felt a pellet scrape his scalp with fire, and there was blood the length of the arm he flung across Brady. He steadied his Colt and fired once, and saw the crimson leap from Kalan's chest. It dyed the man's white shirt as he tried to lift the shotgun again, and then his knees sagged tiredly. He slipped down against the baseboard.

"Gettin' dark," he muttered. "Gettin' dark down in hell. . . ."

Lon tried to stand, and his own knees were rubbery. Blood from his torn scalp had closed one eye. It dripped into his palm from his peppered arm, and he was clinging to the door-case when horemen swept around to the front of the soddy.

"One left!" he heard a Texan whoop, and then Texas Jack Martin's long arm was batting the Colt from his rider's hand.

"Yuh blamed ijit!" he roared, "that' there is Carmichael. "The fightinest sod-buster you'll ever meet. Looks like you've finished cleanin' things up, son."

"There ain't a strand of wire left across the Trail," Texas Jack rumbled, "and I didn't lose me a single man cuttin' it. Hell, them Wichita gunslicks cain't fight wuth shucks. But mebbe we'll find some who can give us a leetle competition when we start hoorawin' that Kent Pryor, and Gillin. You ridin' in with us, Carmichael?"

Sam Masters had hold of Lon's good arm. "Not tonight," the marshal said firmly. "I'd have to arrest him jest sure as shootin' once he crossed the toll-bridge. Fact is I think I'll do it right here," he added with twinkling eyes, "and remand you to the custody of Old Tom, Billie Ford and that blue-eyed sister of his, Eileen! She'll see you don't get in any trouble."

"And I'll dance at yore weddin'!" Texas Jack Martin promised, "iffen you'll name the first young-un after me."

Lon grinned, and wiped at the blood on his face. "You gents are all getting ahead of time. Let me ask the girl!"

"She'll say 'yes'," Billie Ford chuckled. "Why, heck, she's jest been waitin' the chanct. . . ."

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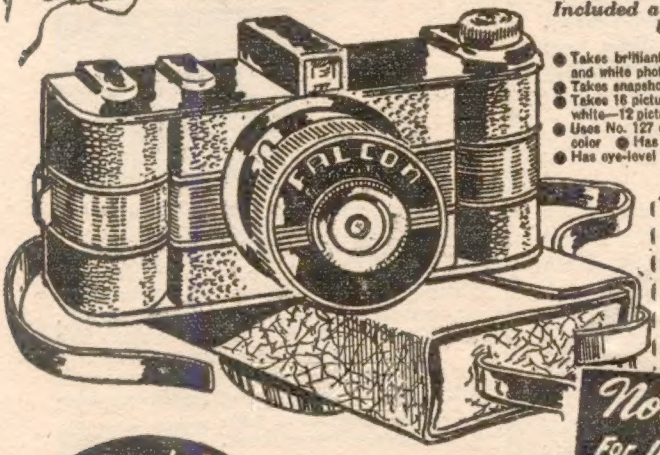

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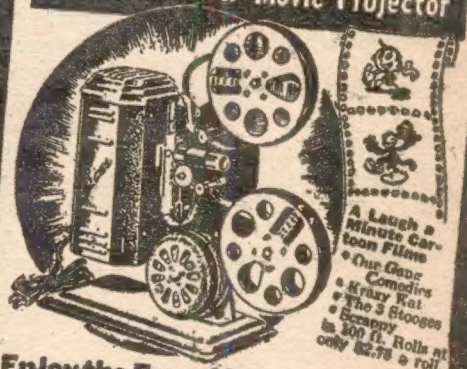

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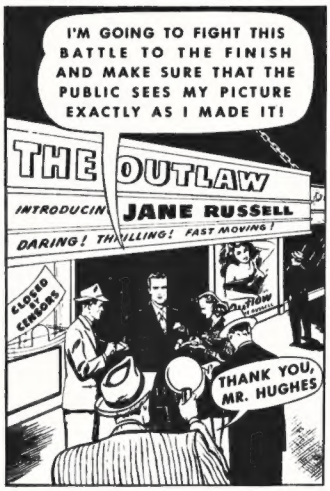
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